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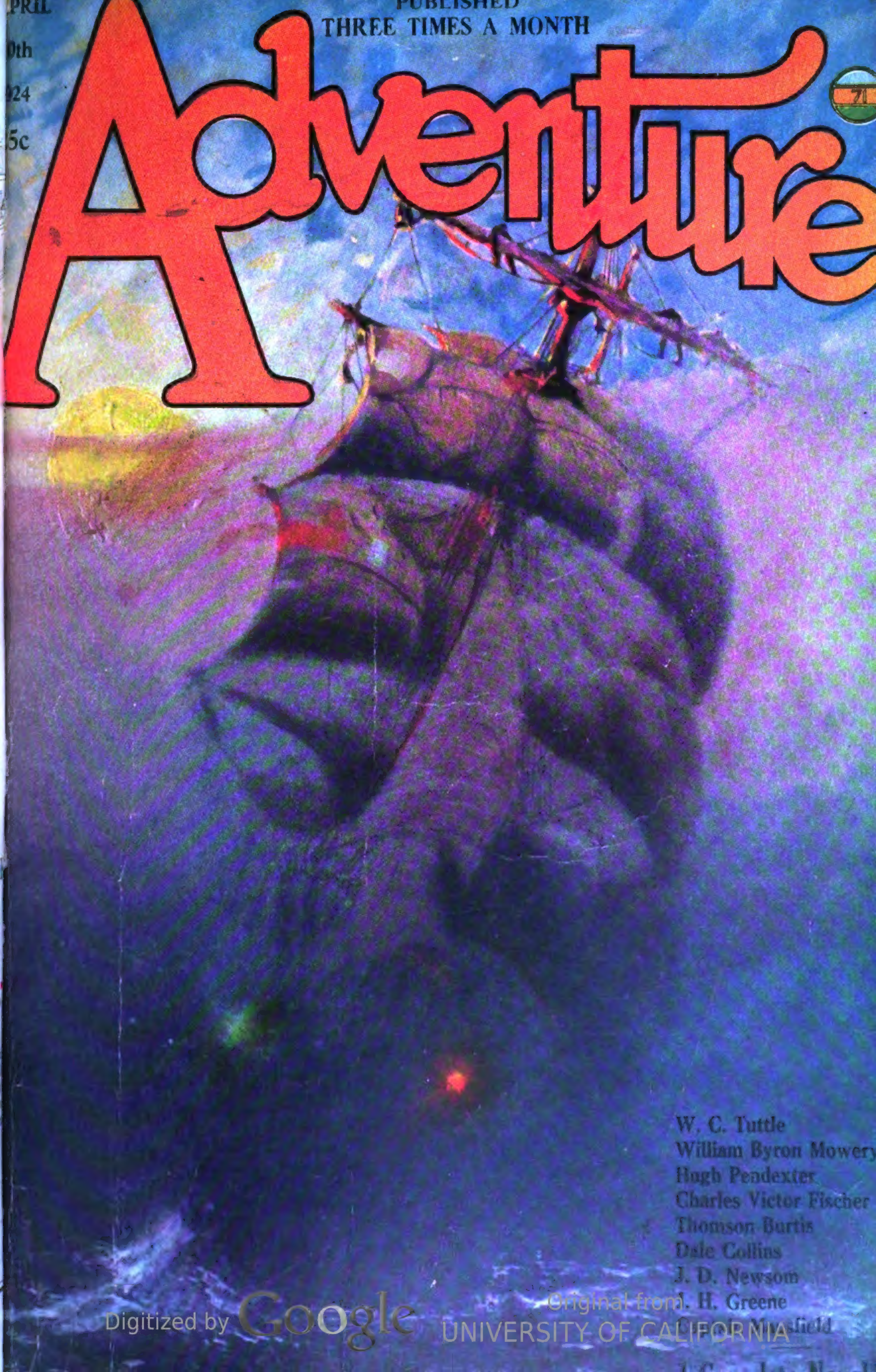

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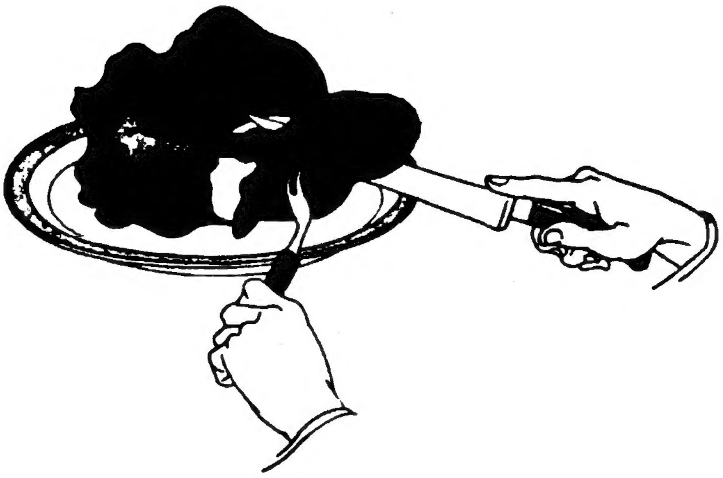

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April 30, 1924

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**Occasionally one of our stories will be called an "Off the Trail" story, a warning that it is in some way different from the usual magazine stories, perhaps a little different, perhaps a good deal. It may violate a canon of literature or a custom of magazines, or merely be different from the type usually found in this magazine. The difference may lie in unusual theme, material, ending, or manner of telling. No question of relative merit is involved.*

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One Complete Novel and One Complete Novelette

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FROM out of the South Seas two men came to the bungalow of *Avery* and his servant, the shark-hunter. "THE TAKER OF SHARKS," a complete novelette by Frederick Moore, in the next issue.

Other stories in the next issue are forecast on the last page of this one.

***Adventure* is out on the 10th, 20th and 30th of each month**

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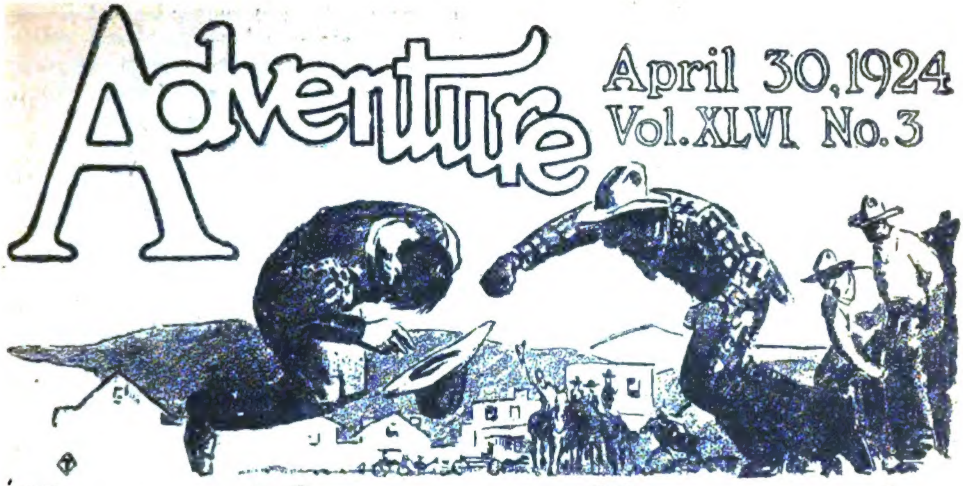

Rustlers' Roost

A Complete Novel by W. C. Tuttle

Author of "The Medicine Man," "Hashknife and the Fantom Riders," etc.

LIKE a brown leaf fluttering in the wind it came through the bars of the cell door. It floated in past a corner of the cot and came to rest on the concrete floor. A heavy brogan slid over it, and "Tex" Rowland, otherwise Number 1733, owner of the brogan, squinted speculatively at the bars.

A trusty had just passed; a wizened-faced, hump-shouldered little old trusty, who had been "Hump" Sherrill before other people's horses had somehow come into his possession, and through said possession had been given a number in a place where there is little use for the Eighth Commandment.

Hump Sherrill had known Tex Rowland in the cattle country. In fact, he and Tex had worked for the same outfit, although there was a vast difference in their ages. Hump had spent a long time in the Elk Lodge penitentiary; a model old prisoner, who had become a trusty around the warden's office.

There was little chance that Hump would ever see the wide ranges again. The law had given him twenty-five years. He had sent two perfectly good officers to the hospital at the time of his arrest, and his combined crimes had caused the judge to give him the limit. And Hump was past middle-age at the time of his arrest.

Tex Rowland sat perfectly still for several minutes. He was in no hurry. Time was something he had more of than anything else. Finally he leaned over, lifted his foot a trifle, and secured the brown cigaret paper which he held concealed in his hand. Slowly he went to the bars and peered out before opening his hand enough to see what was on the paper.

The writing had been done with a lead-pencil and was almost illegible. It read—

> Tex look out their framin yu.

He shut up his hand and squinted wonderingly. He was not at all handsome. His nose was crooked, which gave him sort of an evil look; but there was no evil in his soul. His face was thin, with high cheek-bones, a generous mouth and a strong chin. His upper front teeth were decidedly of the "buck-tooth" variety, which did not add to his facial beauty. But his eyes were level and gray, set in a net-work of grin-wrinkles.

Tex was above medium height, with sloping shoulders and long, muscular arms. He looked as lean as a grayhound and tipped the scales at about a hundred and sixty pounds. Tex had also been a model prisoner since his arrival, about two months previous; but the guards did not put their stamp of approval upon a prisoner until said

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prisoner had been there long enough to realize what it all meant.

Just now Tex was trying to puzzle out the meaning of Hump Sherrill's message, as he masticated the bit of paper and swallowed it. The prison was still a trifle upset over an attempted "break," in which a prisoner had been shot and killed by a guard.

Tex had taken no part in the affair. In fact, he did not know anything about it until it was all over. The authorities had made an attempt to find out who was the instigator of the thing, but, from what the prisoners had been able to find out, they were unable to fix the blame.

"What are they tryin' to frame me for?" wondered Tex. "I ain't done nothin'. They framed me into this place, and that ought to be enough to do to one ordinary cowpuncher."

He leaned back on his stool and tried to figure out what he had done. He did not like Jim McHague, the head warden. It was not a dislike born from anything that McHague had done, but an instinctive dislike. He did not like the perpetual sneer on McHague's hard features; the aggressive swing of his beefy body. It had seemed to Tex that McHague's every action spoke plainer than words—

"I am your master."

And Tex Rowland's gorge arose at this. He had been railroaded into prison; sent up for five years for stealing horses, which he had not stolen. Perhaps that was why Hump Sherrill took the chance of warning him. It rather made them brothers-in-crime.

But Tex had little time to puzzle out why he was to be framed. A guard came down the hall, unlocked his door and informed him that he was wanted at the warden's office.

"What for?" asked Tex.

"You don't ask questions here," reminded the guard coldly.

"Uh-huh," grinned Tex. "Oh, all right, pardner."

The guard growled and herded Tex down the narrow corridor. The warden's office was on the ground floor at the front of the main building, connected to the prison proper by a sort of anteroom, with heavily barred windows. Tex was conducted through this room and into the office, where he came face to face with McHague.

The guard, at a nod from the warden, backed out of the room, leaving Tex apparently alone with the head warden. McHague was busy at his desk and paid no attention to Tex, who stood waiting for him to make known his wants.

At the right, another door opened into a room. Tex could see a high desk and stool and some books. It was evidently part of the office. And as Tex flashed a glance in that direction, he saw the muzzle of a shotgun slip past the edge of the partly-open door. It was only there for a fraction of a second; but that was long enough for Tex to know that Hump's warning was not a joke.

He studied McHague closely, and the warden looked up. For several moments they looked at each other, like two fighters measuring each other's defense. Then McHague got to his feet. On the flat-top desk was a heavy revolver. Tex had seen it when he first came in. It was a mighty good-looking gun, thought Tex.

"You are 1733, eh?" said McHague throatily.

"My name's Tex Rowland," said Tex evenly.

"Not here, it ain't!" snapped McHague. "You're just a number here, young feller."

Tex shut his lips tightly and looked past the warden. He knew that there was no use quarreling. McHague grinned. His eyes flashed toward the gun on his desk, as if wondering if Tex would be fool enough to try and grab it.

"What did you want me for?" asked Tex softly.

"That's a —— of a question for you to ask," grunted McHague. "Just take my advice, and don't try to hedge. We've got the goods on you, 1733."

"Thasso? What for?" Tex was thinking fast. He knew that there was a double-barreled shotgun in that room behind him; and a shotgun, at close range, is a mighty wicked weapon. He wanted to turn his head, but did not want McHague to know that he had seen the muzzle of that gun.

"What for?"

McHague laughed hoarsely and lighted a cigar. Tex could see that his hands trembled. He also noticed that McHague was keeping out of a direct line with the door. It was growing dark outside, and McHague snapped on a light.

"I'll tell you what for, 1733; for instigating that attempted jail-break a few days ago. We've got the goods on you; so come clean, you dirty horse-thief!"

Tex jerked forward at the epithet; but did not move out of his tracks. He knew that McHague was trying to provoke an attack, but just why, he did not know. He shot a glance at the gun on McHague's desk. He was nearer to it now than McHague was.

"Unloaded," he decided. "He's tryin' to get me to make a break for it and give an excuse for that jigger behind the door to blow me into jerky with that shotgun."

McHague was paying little attention to Tex, although waiting for Tex to answer the accusation.

"You know that's a —— lie," said Tex evenly.

McHague whirled angrily, gripping the cigar tightly between his big teeth.

"Don't tell me that I lie!" he snorted. "You know who I am?"

"I know what I'd call yuh," said Tex slowly, "I know who yuh are and what yuh are, accordin' to my own views, McHague."

McHague laughed shortly and threw away his cigar.

"You're in a place where you'll be —— glad to change your views, 1733. I'm running this place, and, by a crook of my finger, I can hand you more unadulterated —— than you ever dreamed about. And if you don't come across and tell all you know about the plans for that break, I'll show you what I mean by unadulterated ——. Now, start talking."

Tex shook his head slowly.

"Hop to it, McHague. You know I didn't have any hand in that job."

"Won't talk, eh?" McHague moved aside, completely masking himself from those inside the other office. "We'll make you talk. They tell me that you were quite a fighter in your own home; but you won't have any chance to fight here. We don't fight men in here—we break 'em."

"I s'pose that's right," said Tex softly. "But when yuh say 'we,' yuh mean 'I,' don'tcha, McHague? The state don't stand for none of that stuff. Yo're put here to take care of men—not to torture 'em."

McHague laughed and shook his head.

"The state put me in charge here, 1733." He came nearer and shoved out his square jaw belligerently. "And I'll do as I —— please, as long as I have charge. You're here for five years, and I'll make it seem fifty.

"You left a girl, didn't you, 1733? I think they told me that you were about to get married. Was that right?"

Tex had turned pale and his eyes narrowed dangerously. Just now he had forgotten the man with the shotgun.

"Well?" he said huskily, his hands clenched tightly, as he swayed forward a trifle. "Go ahead, McHague."

"She hasn't written to you, has she?"

"You ought to know," said Tex. "The letter would have to come through your office."

McHague laughed grimly, meaningly.

"You'd steal my letters?" asked Tex hoarsely. "You——"

"I told you I could make it seem like fifty years, 1733. Now, you tell me who planned that break. Talk fast. I've wasted enough time with you."

"You'd steal my letters?" queried Tex. "You'd stop me from hearin' from anybody? Why, McHague? What have I ever done to you? You know I never planned that break. You've got a shotgun man in that next room, and he's ready to fill me with buckshot; but you never stopped to think that a riot-gun scatters kinda bad—and I'm goin' to take a chance with you."

TEX had spoken softly; so softly that his voice would hardly carry to the next room, and before he finished he was in action. Even McHague, who had taunted him into a killing mood, was hardly prepared for the assault, and Tex's first blow loosened his front teeth and split his upper-lip badly.

And as Tex smashed him with a left hook, which staggered the big man, he ducked past, leaving McHague between him and the door. McHague was swinging wildly with both hands, forcing Tex to back toward the wall; but Tex shifted his eyes enough to see that the man with the shotgun was already inside the room, but unable to use his weapon.

Tex realized that, in the eyes of the law, this guard would be justified in killing him. It would be recorded as a case where a convict attempted to kill the warden during an investigation.

McHague was forcing him toward a corner, and Tex had his choice of being pinned to the wall by a giant of a man, or to duck aside and allow the shotgun man to get in his deadly work. They had fought silently;

only the soft shuffle of their feet and their quick breathing to show that they were in combat.

Now McHague was reaching for Tex with his two big hands, thinking that Tex was quitting; but a fraction of a second later Tex's right hand shot from his hip in a sweeping uppercut, and caught McHague squarely on the point of his chin. It was sent in with every ounce of Tex's strength and weight behind it—timed perfectly.

McHague's hands dropped to his sides, his head jerked back and he dropped in a loose-jointed heap on the floor. He was completely knocked out. Tex leaned back against the wall, staring at the shotgun man, who was flat on the floor, doubled across his gun, while behind him stood the stooped figure of old Hump Sherrill, a heavy stool in his hands.

He straightened up, a half-grin on his seamed face, as he glanced quickly toward the other door. Swiftly he came across the room and looked at McHague. The big warden was groaning softly. Swiftly the old man took a big handkerchief from McHague's pocket and proceeded to gag him securely. Then he crossed the room, picked up the shotgun and examined it.

"This one is plumb cooled off," he whispered across to Tex, indicating the man he had hit with the stool. "Nobody knows what has gone on in here, Tex. Shuck off your clothes and help yo'reself to what McHague's wearin'. It's too big for yuh, but we can't wait for a fittin'. Hop to it, kid."

"You mean—we'll make a break, Hump?" whispered Tex.

"—— right. It's a chance, Tex. If anybody comes in—well, I've got two loads of buck-shot. Hurry up."

As swiftly as possible Tex removed McHague's clothes. McHague was recovering dully now, muttering softly, trying to prevent Tex from removing his clothes. Then he sat up and goggled around. Old Hump Sherrill shoved the muzzle of the shotgun close to his face and said softly:

"Don't talk, McHague. That gag ain't none too good, but it's a good alibi. Now, you set still, or I'll shoot yore —— head off."

McHague knew what Hump was saying. His eyes shifted to the figure of his guard and back at old Hump. He knew that the old trusty had hit the guard from behind. But just now his jaw was aching and the gag was uncomfortable.

Old Hump squinted at Tex, who was draped in McHague's clothes, and a grin wreathed his face.

"Danged good thing it's dark, Tex. Take this gun a minute."

He went softly into the next room and appeared in a moment with a collection of handcuffs, which he proceeded to put on McHague. Then he added a dirty rag to McHague's gag, took another look at the unconscious guard, picked up the empty revolver and handed it to Tex.

"It ain't loaded, Tex; but it looks good. C'mon and don't lose yore nerve."

They went down a long hall, which opened outside. At the door Hump cautioned Tex.

"There's a guard out there, Tex. We'll start toward McHague's residence: *sabe*? I work over there once in a while. But when we hit the main trail we'll go straight to the big gate. There's a gateman there and a guard on the wall.

"Jamb that gun into his ribs and make him open the gate. If he yelps, we're a goner. Now don't git nervous. It's our chance, kid. C'm on."

They walked boldly out of the door and crossed the court. The guard merely glanced at them, but in the half-light he only saw the head warden and a trusty. McHague's tan suit and light-colored fedora hat were easy to identify, and the guard did not notice the difference in size.

"One baby down, one see-gar," chuckled old Hump as they turned sharply and headed for the big gate.

They were walking slowly as they came up to the gate. The guard squinted narrowly at old Hump, recognizing him as a trusty. He had already noticed the light fedora, but on closer inspection he suddenly realized that it was not McHague. But before his lips had a chance to frame a question, Tex shoved the big six-shooter into his waist-line. The guard on the wall had seen them approach the gate, but was not interested in seeing McHague leave the prison.

"Open the gate," demanded old Hump softly. "We're goin' out, if we have to take the keys off yore carcass."

"And one yelp will be yore last," added Tex. "Move fast."

And the gateman obeyed. He knew that he was worth a lot more to himself than the gateman's job was; and this crooked-nosed, young convict seemed entirely capable of following out his threat.

The big gate swung open without a sound. Tex shoved the gateman out ahead of him, just as the guard on the wall looked down toward the gate. He was not suspicious—just looking. It was the first time he had ever seen the gateman step outside.

Then he observed that it was the trusty who was closing the gate behind them. Of course, it was McHague's business if he wanted to take a trusty outside with him; but the guard moved a trifle closer, watching more intently. The three men were talking. Then they started away together, with the gateman walking slightly in the lead. It was so irregular that the guard called McHague's name. Neither of the three stopped. In fact, they began going away faster. Then the guard threw up his rifle and began shooting.

The gateman had voiced no objection, when Tex demanded his company. In fact, the gateman felt that it was either that or a smash over the head, because these men would not leave him there to send the alarm. Perhaps, he thought, the guard would notice that it was irregular—which he did.

The first shot whizzed over their heads and tore deeply into the macadam road-bed. The light was weak and the guard was shooting high; being unable to notch his sights closely.

"Run for it!" grunted Hump. "To —— with this jasper!"

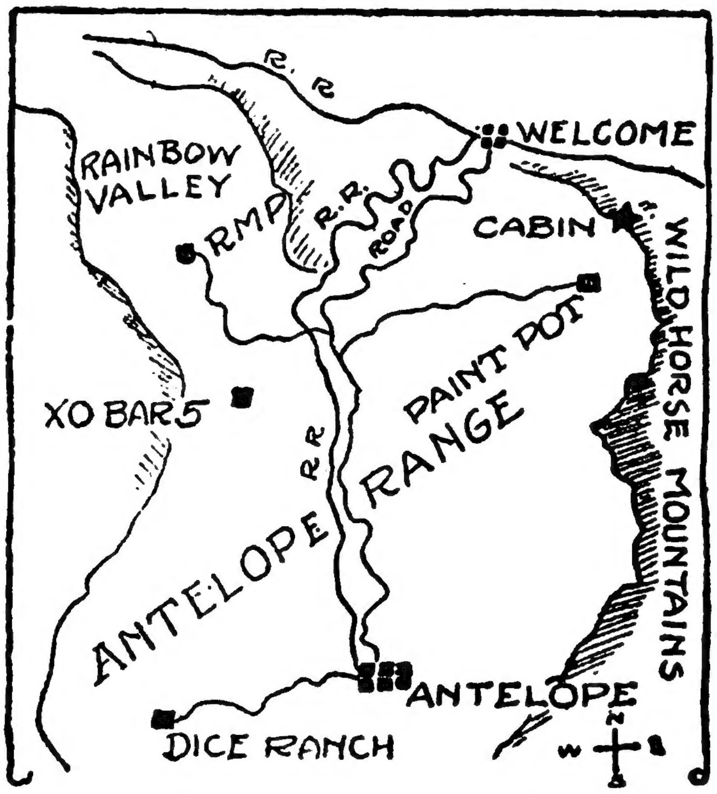
He shoved the gateman aside, and he and Tex raced down the road. Suddenly old Hump stumbled, recovered and tried to go on, but slumped to his hands and knees.

"Don't stop, Tex," he croaked hoarsely, as Tex stopped and came back to him. "They got me, kid. Through the lungs, I reckon. Go on, Tex. For ——'s sake, go on—can't—talk. Wanted — to — see—old range, kid—McHague wanted to kill you—before—pardon—go on—Tex."

He slid face down in the road and Tex knew that old Hump Sherrill was dead. The guard was shooting again. Somewhere a bell rang loudly and the big whistle sent out its siren warning, telling the world that a convict had escaped.

Tex whirled and ran swiftly down through some bushes, down the side of a hill, where he scrambled through a fence and reached the bank of the river. It was dark down there. The whistle seemed almost at his elbow. The blood was pounding in his ears, but he thought he could hear the shouts of men, as they started on his trail.

Then he plunged over the clay bank of the river, slid into the water and headed for the opposite side. The water was cool and sluggish. He had only swum a few strokes when he found that his feet would touch bottom; so he waded the rest of the distance and plunged into the brush on the opposite side.



He found an old trail, which led up the other bank, and he came out on to a railroad grade. He stopped and tried to find his bearings. Far across the river he could see the lights from the prison. They seemed farther away than he would suppose. There was a singing sound on the steel rails which told him that a train was approaching.

Swiftly he slunk back against the brushy side of the cut and went through the pockets of his clothes. Pocket after pocket he emptied, until there was nothing left that could possibly identify him. The accumulated mass of water-soaked letters, etc., were quickly buried under a rubble of dirt and stones.

Now the headlights of an engine flashed down past him, and the roar of the oncoming train drowned out all other sounds. Tex had never beaten a railroad out of a ride; did not know how to swing on to a moving car; but he was going to take a chance.

It was a passenger train, evidently running the grade on a slow-order. The engine clanked past him, running at not over five miles an hour, and Tex sprang upright, grasped the handles and drew himself on to the blind-baggage, where he crouched down.

He realized that there was no door opening on to that platform, and that the tender prevented the engine crew from seeing him. For the time being he was perfectly safe; so he stretched out and tried to reason out just what he was going to do.

He knew that every train would be searched as soon as the alarm had been sent out to a telegraph office. But he also knew that this train stood a good chance of being immune. It had left Elk Lodge too soon for him to have taken it. Only luck had sent him straight across the river in time to board it on the grades.

Station after station they passed. Tex kept a close watch and always managed to be on the opposite side from the brightest lights. A little past midnight he dropped off at a division point, and hid behind a tool box while the engines were changed. Then he climbed on again and they roared away into the night, reeling off mile after mile, taking him farther and farther away from the men who were beating the Elk Lodge country for him.

It was about three o'clock in the morning. Tex was dozing sleepily, trying to keep one eye open. They were on a down-grade, high in the mountains. The brakes were screeching as they lurched around the curves. Tex realized that they were going altogether too fast. It woke him up and he started to get to his feet, when the tender whirled sideways, a sheet of flame shot up from the rails and Tex's car upended, as if trying to hurdle the twisting mass of steel and flying coal ahead of it.

Tex shot into space, struck heavily against something, which caused him to spin dizzily; while to his numbed ears came the splintering crash of the coaches; twisting, rolling, demolishing themselves in the worst passenger wreck of the year. Then he went down, down, down into a black void, where he seemed doomed to keep falling forever.

AND while the passenger train carried Tex Rowland out of the Elk Lodge country, Jim McHague swore bitterly at every one, as he sat in his office and directed the man-hunt. Fifty men were out in the open; guards watched every road and trail out of the country, while others searched the town, the trains; leaving no loophole for the man who had outwitted the State.

The story and a description of Tex Rowland was broadcasted to the press; but it was not the true story. McHague's version was somewhat different than what had really happened. He told that Hump Sherrill was the one who planned the getaway.

He said that he had called Tex into his office for an interview, regarding the late attempted prison-break. Hump Sherrill had hinted that Tex knew something about it. He explained that Sherrill was an old trusty, who had never given any trouble; but, unknown to the authorities, was an old friend of Rowland.

During the inteview, without any warning, Sherrill had struck the guard, who was present, with a heavy stool, almost killing him. It was so unlooked for that Sherrill had secured the guard's gun and had covered him—McHague—forcing him to put up his hands. Then Tex Rowland had struck the blow that rendered the warden unconscious. McHague, according to his version, awoke from the effects of the foul blow to find himself bound and gagged. He was unable to sound any warning; but found later that the guard at the gate had killed Sherrill. He claimed that it was so unlooked for that neither he nor the guard had a chance. Sherrill had been a trusty for several years, and no one had ever suspected him of a plot to free himself.

McHague did not leave his office that night, but waited patiently for them to bring Tex Rowland back to him. Morning came, but the searchers reported failure. The wires were kept hot. Every sheriff in the State was notified.

In the morning a pair of bloodhounds were put on the trail which led to the river. They were taken across in a boat and had little trouble in picking up the trail on that side. McHague went with the dogs. He felt sure that Tex had headed into the mountains, and that the hounds would lead them to him in a short time; but at the railroad they lost the scent.

One of them circled several times and stopped at a small pile of dirt and stones, pawing at it eagerly, unearthing the soggy contents of McHague's suit. McHague swore witheringly and sent the dogs back to the penitentiary, while he went back to the town of Elk Lodge and sent more telegrams. It was plainly evident that Tex Rowland had boarded a train. But just what train and in what direction, there was no way of knowing.

News of the big passenger train wreck had reached Elk Lodge. McHague questioned the operator about the train, thinking that Tex might have boarded it; but its leaving time, and the time of Tex's escape, seemed to preclude all chance of him being on that train.

"We'll get him," declared McHague. "He may dodge us for a while, but we'll get him. You can't mistake that face."

And McHague grinned to himself, as he visualized what he would do to Tex Rowland when Tex came back to Elk Lodge. He would surely pay Tex for that uppercut to the chin. It still hurt. Still he was glad that no one except Tex and Sherrill had seen it. McHague wanted to be known as a fighting man. And he had other reasons for wanting Tex back behind the bars.

II

TEX'S fall through space had not been unpleasant. At times he had heard voices, but was unable exactly to locate them. Now he seemed to have come out of the darkness. He remembered the wreck. It was like a dream. Some one bent over him, and he heard a voice say—

"Yes, I think he is awake, doctor."

"Doctor, eh?" thought Tex disinterestedly.

Some one else leaned over him, jiggling the cot slightly. He tried to speak, but his jaw seemed set. He could only see out of one eye, too. The other was bandaged.

"Feeling better?" asked a masculine voice.

Tex tried to turn his head, which felt queer. He could move his feet and one hand. His nose hurt and his mouth was as dry as ashes.

"That bandage is rather tight," observed a feminine voice.

"It must be tight," laughed the man. "He hasn't talked for a week; so a few days more won't bother him. Hasn't any fever now."

Tex managed to turn his head enough to catch a one-eyed view of the room. There was a gray-haired man, with a short beard and kindly blue eyes, standing beside a white-clad woman. They were both looking at the sheet of paper which the man was holding.

He lifted his eyes and looked at Tex.

"Well, he's able to twist around for a look," he laughed as he came in closer.

Tex looked the man over with his one eye. There was an odor of ether about the place, and Tex knew that he was in a hospital. The doctor was looking down at him, smiling in a friendly manner, and Tex tried to smile in return, but the bandage prevented.

"You won't be able to do much talking for a few days," said the doctor. "But you will be as good as new. Perhaps you will be better than new—who knows?"

He turned to the nurse, gave her some instructions and went out of the room. Tex wanted to ask her some questions; wanted to find out where he was and how badly he had been hurt; but his jaw was in a vise.

He remembered it all now, and he wondered how close the law was on his trail. Possibly, he thought, they might know where he was at this moment. He found that he was pretty well bandaged all over, but there was little pain. His face felt stiff and hard, but he attributed it to the bandages.

Finally the nurse came over and sat down beside him. She was serious of face, as she said to him—

"No doubt you are wondering all about it."

Tex blinked his one eye encouragingly.

"You remember the wreck?"

Tex moved his head a trifle and winked at her. She laughed softly.

"One doesn't need more than one eye to talk," she said, "but it makes a one-sided conversation. You have been here over a week."

Tex blinked several times violently, and decided that he must have been pretty badly hurt.

"It was a bad wreck," continued the nurse. "There were many killed. They thought you were dead. Your clothes were torn from your body, along with a lot of flesh and skin. It was a close call, I will assure you. But Doctor Ames is a wonder. He was here a few minutes ago, and is very much interested in your case. No one was able to identify you, and your clothes were in such a bad shape that even the maker's name had disappeared.

"But the doctor says that the bandages can be removed in a few days, and you will be able to communicate with your friends.

Won't that be fine? I can well imagine that they have given you up for lost."

Tex blinked several times. He wanted to know more. It was a relief to him to know that no one had identified him.

"Why we even had a dentist here to assist in the work," she smiled. "You were quite a problem."

"My gosh!" thought Tex. "I must 'a' got my teeth knocked out, too."

"Now," she said, "I think that is enough information for today. Just be patient and everything will be fine."

Tex winked thankfully and went back to sleep. At least he was safe for a while, because even McHague could not identify him inside that mass of wrappings which made him look like an Egyptian mummy. And it would give him a sanctuary while the interest in his escape dwindled.

The next few days were months to Tex Rowland. The doctor came in twice a day to look him over, and the nurse took keen delight in joking Tex about his one expressive eye.

Then came the day when the doctor told him that the bandages were coming off. Several other doctors came in to see the results of Doctor Ames's handiwork, and assisted him in the unwrapping. It was a tedious job, and Tex was hardly aware that the bandages were off.

His face felt stiff and unnatural, but he was able to use his arms and legs. They were stiff and sore, but gave good promise of becoming useful again with a little exercise. The doctors' expressions of satisfaction reassured Tex somewhat, but it was not until the nurse brought him a hand-mirror that he knew what had happened.

He looked closely at himself, squinted quizzically at the doctors and back at himself. Then looked at the back of the mirror; like a monkey which does not understand its own reflection.

"Well?" said Doctor Ames. "What is the verdict?"

Tex gazed into the mirror, flexing the muscles of his stiff-feeling face. Then he looked slowly up at the doctor and said, speaking with great difficulty—

"My ——, where did I get that face?"

Doctor Ames patted him on the shoulder. "My boy, it was the best I could do. It would have been impossible to tell just what you did look like before you broke up half the mountain side with your face. Still, I do not think it is such a bad face."

Tex squinted at himself again. It was not a face he had ever seen; it was a total stranger who looked him square in the eyes from the little mirror. In the place of that crooked, ill-shapen nose, was one of classic design. There was no evil expression about the eyes now, with their well-arched brows. The upper-lip was straight and his front teeth were very pearly and not at all prominent.

There was a considerable growth of beard, in spots, and the scars of the patchwork were plainly evident; but it was not the face of Tex Rowland. He laid the mirror down on the covers and his new face broke into a painful grin.

"I hope you will be able to identify yourself," said the doctor.

Tex grinned and shook his head.

"Tha'sall right, doc," he said slowly. "I reckon yuh done the best yuh could. Yuh must 'a' just about made it all over, but I dunno how yuh pulled off the job."

Doctor Ames smiled. He was professionally happy over it, and received the congratulations of the other doctors, who were sincere in saying that it was even greater than they expected. One of them slapped Doctor Ames on the back and said jokingly:

"Ames, it is just too good. You have made him a handsome man; but there is little character."

"That will come," assured Ames. "In a little while he will get back the lines. Perhaps I did try for an ideal face."

Tex only laughed and looked into the mirror.

"Have you a photo of yourself?" asked the nurse.

Tex shook his head, although he felt sure that his picture had been broadcast after his escape. The nurse stepped to the door and held a low-toned conversation with some one for several moments before coming back and speaking aside to Doctor Ames. The other doctors were closely examining Tex's face, when Doctor Ames' voice broke into the conversation, speaking to Tex—

"Do you feel well enough to talk to a man, who has been waiting anxiously to have a few words with you?"

Tex's heart sank. Was it an officer, he wondered. A dozen wild guesses shot through his mind as the well-dressed man came up to the bed and looked down at him. But the man was not wearing a badge of authority, and there was a smile on his lips.

"I am from the railroad company," he explained briskly, as he took some legal-looking papers from his pocket. "Claim department, you know. The company is straightening out the claims as fast as possible. I have been here several times, but have been unable to see you."

Tex squinted thoughtfully. It puzzled him. Doctor Ames moved in closer and looked at the papers, which the agent was arranging.

"No," he said smiling broadly, "I am not encroaching upon your rights, Mr. Agent; but I have an interest in this patient, and I do not want him to get the worst of this deal."

"I understand." The agent nodded quickly. "Contrary to general belief, the company is not trying to dodge their responsibilities. We stand ready and willing to pay any reasonable claim. I have been empowered to close this claim for five thousand dollars. It is quite a sum of money, but we realize that this man has suffered greatly, possibly in more ways than one. Is that a fair price?"

Doctor Ames looked at Tex for an answer; but Tex was too stunned to answer. It was hard to realize that the railroad company was trying to pay him five thousand dollars for injuries received in the wreck. They did not know that he was stealing a ride.

"What do you think?" asked Doctor Ames.

Tex opened his mouth several times, but seemed unable to speak. The agent had unfolded the paper and was handing a fountain-pen to Tex. Between his finger and thumb he held a nice, pink check for five thousand dollars.

Tex shook his head and looked at Doctor Ames.

"I don't want the money," he said softly. "I want you folks to figure out yore bill for what you've done for me, and ask him to pay yuh. That might be real square. I'll sign my name, but I don't want any money."

"My goodness!" exclaimed one of the doctors. "Ames, you have rebuilt the face of a millionaire."

"Do you realize what you are doing?" asked the nurse. "This man wants to pay you five thousand dollars."

"Yeah, and I don't want it," smiled Tex. "You have 'em fix it up, so you and the doctor gets paid for yore work, and I'll sign the li'l old name."

The agent turned to Doctor Ames, a grin on his lips.

"What about it, doctor?" he asked. "I can change this to fit an emergency. This man seems sincere; but in all my experience I have never before met a man who would not accept a five-thousand-dollar check. I am willing to fix it up in any way you wish."

He and the doctor walked over by the door, conversing in low tones, while the agent altered the document with his pen. In a few moments they came back and one of the doctors held a book under the document, while Tex Rowland laboriously scratched on the dotted line—

William H. Smith.

Doctor Ames squinted at the signature as he handed it back to the agent.

"William H. Smith, millionaire," he said, laughing. "Not exactly an uncommon name. Bill Smith, philanthropist. Is the initial 'H' for Henry?"

"No," said Tex slowly. "My middle name is Horse-shoes."

"What a queer name," said the nurse. "You ought to be lucky."

"Mebbe yuh don't think I am," grinned Tex, as he sank back on his pillow and looked up at the white ceiling. He had a new face and a new name. Tex Rowland had died in the wreck.

III

OLD Rory McPherson, with a cow-puncher riding on each side of him, came to Antelope town. It was an event, when Rory came to Antelope. He was past middle-age, a tall, thin man, with a thatch of flaming red hair, red whiskers and a fighting eye. His face was thin and almost as red as his whiskers, while his eyes were of an ice-berg blue.

Rory had been a powerful fighting man in his youth, and wo unto him who might hint that Rory was not as young as he used to be! He swung off his big roan horse, tied it to a hitch-rack, and looked around belligerently, as if daring any one to contest his right to be in town.

None did. Rory knew that they would not; but he always waited for some one to try. With him was Dick Clarey and "Biddy" Toole, two of his cowpunchers. They wore their sombreros at an aggressive angle, swaggered in their walk and talked boldly.

Antelope was a town of about two hundred inhabitants; but it boasted a two-story brick building wherein was housed the bank. Two-story brick buildings were not common in that part of the range country, and Antelope had a right to be proud.

The rest of the business houses were of the false-front, one-story variety, with wind and sand-scoured signs, badly in need of paint. There was the inevitable board sidewalks, built well above the ground for no apparent reason, except, as one of the old timers said, "It makes 'em high enough t' set on kinda good."

Old Rory shoved his hands into his overall pockets and threw back his head as he stared at the brick building. It was not new. Rory had seen it many times; but he always stared at it, muttering a curse into his red beard.

He hated "Big Jim" Mott, the man who had built and owned that brick building; hated him with every drop of his Scotch blood.

Big Jim had said—

"—— you; I'll sheep out Rainbow Valley one of these days!"

Old Rory McPherson owned Rainbow Valley; and he replied:

"Ye will? Then that will be many a long year after the sheep have made a vile-smellin' dust heap out of Antelope."

And Big Jim Mott owned Antelope range. The feud between Rory and Big Jim had started before the advent of the branch railroad into Antelope. The railroad had made old Rory even more bitter.

The logical thing, according to Rory, would have been for the railroad to have come in through Rainbow Valley, leaving the main line at a point about three miles north of Claymore, the little village at the upper end of Rainbow, and following an easy grade down through Rainbow and into the Antelope country.

But instead, it came in from the town of Welcome, twisted in and out of the hills, barely touching the lower border of Rainbow and running due south to Antelope. And old Rory McPherson knew why the railroad did not come in through Rainbow. He knew that Big Jim's political pull kept the railroad out of Rainbow Valley.

It had been of no advantage to Big Jim, and had not injured Rory McPherson, as far as that was concerned; but a railroad through Rainbow Valley would have been of decided advantage to Rory. And Rory knew that Big Jim had done all this with malice aforethought.

"You and your dir-r-rty buildin'!" muttered Rory.

"What did yuh say?" asked Dick Clarey.

"Nawthin'."

Rory squinted across the street, jerking the brim of his sombrero a trifle lower, as he spelled out a faded sign—

MISS FREELAND, MILLINERY

He nodded slowly and turned to the two cowboys.

"Be cir-r-cumspect, will ye? I've an errand just now."

He turned on his heel and crossed the street toward the little millinery store, while the two cowboys looked at each other. They grinned as they turned toward a saloon entrance.

"What in the —— is he goin' to do there?" wondered Dick.

"He's not goin' to buy hats, that's a cinch," laughed Biddy.

Old Rory rattled his spurs up to the door and knocked loudly. After a moment the door creaked half-way open and a faded-looking little woman stared out at him.

"I'm lookin' for Miss Della Mar-r-rsh," he told her. "She wor-rks here, I've been told."

The little woman shook her head quickly.

"She did work here," she said, as if apologizing, "but they gave her a position over in the bank, Mr. McPherson. She has been there nearly a week now."

Old Rory stared at her, turned his head slowly and squinted at the hated building.

"Over there?" He jerked his thumb in that direction. "Do ye mean to say that she's wor-r-rkin' in that building, ma'am?"

"Yes—for the bank."

"Oh, ho-o-o! For the bank, ye say? Now what the —— do ye know about that?"

The door shut quickly behind him. But he did not mind. In fact he had forgotten all about the little milliner lady. He clenched his freckled old hands until the knuckles looked like rows of white marbles, and his lower jaw jutted angrily. There was no question but what Rory McPherson was very angry.

He started across the street toward the bank, but changed his mind and went to the saloon, where he found Dick and Biddy at the bar.

"Have a little drink, Rory?" invited Biddy, moving aside to give the old man room.

But Rory shook his head angrily.

"I've no stomach for-r-r anythin' in this town!" he snorted. "I've been insulted by me own flesh and blood. It may not be a Christian thing to tak' the name of the Lord in vain, but right noo I'm gr-r-ropin' for wor-r-rds that will fit the occasion."

"What's gone wrong?" queried Dick Clarey.

"Wrong? Did ye say wrong, Dick? Everythin'! Della has gone to wor-r-rk for that——"

Old Rory shut his lips tightly, and his beard lifted like the hair on the back of an angry dog.

Dick and Biddy understood what he meant. Biddy fingered his glass, his head cocked on one side thoughtfully.

"At the ranch, Rory?" he asked.

"In the bank, Biddy."

"What doin'?" queried Dick.

"No matter what doin'!" snorted Rory. "It's another of his dir-rty deals. I came here to take her awa' from the makin' of hats. No job is that for a bit o' a lass; not while her uncle has a cent. And I find her wor-rkin' for—that! Shamin' me, he is."

The old man's voice trembled with anger, but he threw up his head and turned to the bar, which he thumbed with his clenched fist.

"Gi'e me whusky," he ordered hoarsely. "When ye'r hear-rt tells ye to kill—drink whusky for ballast. Gi'e me the bottle, will ye? That glass is no sup for a sufferin' mon."

After a few big drinks Rory was well organized for anything. His Scotch brogue grew more broad, but the whisky softened his bitterness. A vacant chair at a poker table called to him; so he sat down to play, while Dick and Biddy slipped out of the place and went down to the bank. They knew that the old man was good for several hours and several more drinks, and that he was not liable to get into trouble while under the influence of liquor. It seemed that liquor softened his nature, although his conversation became so full of burs that no one could understand him.

They found Della Marsh in the bank; a slip of a girl, with an oval face framed in a mass of brown hair. There seemed to be a perpetual sadness about her wide, blue eyes, and she greeted them with a wistful smile.

"How long have yuh been here, Dell?" asked Dick.

"About a week, Dick. How is Rainbow Valley?"

"Fine. The old man came in with us."

"Uncle Rory? Where is he?"

"Over in the Eagle saloon. Say, Dell, he's sore as a boil."

"Sore? What about, Dick?"

Dick lowered his voice:

"Because you're workin' here. You know this bank belongs to Big Jim Mott, don'tcha?"

"Why, yes, I know it. But I don't see——"

"Listen," interrupted Biddy. "He came in today to get yuh to go back to the ranch, Dell. He knowed that yuh was workin' at that millinery store. He wants yuh to come back home. I reckon we all want yuh to come back, too, Dell."

Biddy shuffled his feet nervously. Della looked at him, her eyes smiling. But she shook her head slowly:

"No, I don't want to go back there, Biddy. I don't want to be dependent on any one, don't you see? I can make my own living."

"That's true," nodded Biddy. "If it was anybody but Mott."

"You didn't ask for the job, did yuh, Dell?" asked Dick.

Della colored slightly, but shook her head.

"No, I didn't, Dick. Mr. Mott asked me if I wanted to work in the bank. It is not hard work."

"It'll sure be hard for Rory McPherson," declared Biddy.

"Oh, I'm sorry about that," said Della wistfully. "I wish that Uncle Rory and Mr. Mott would be friends. Mr. Mott seems so big and generous; not at all as I had believed him to be."

"A snake is slick," muttered Biddy, "and a coyote ain't no homely critter."

"That is unkind, Biddy," said Della softly.

"Ex-cuse me," said Biddy quickly. "I was thinkin' outloud. And we just found out the other day that Jim Mott owns the old XO-Bar-5."

"The XO-Bar-5?" questioned Della wonderingly. "Why, I thought it belonged to Maryin Crane."

"Well, it don't," declared Biddy. "He was just runnin' it."

"Then it was Mott who——"

Della stopped and stared out through the open door.

"Yeah," nodded Dick seriously. "It was Big Jim Mott who sent Tex Rowland to the penitentiary, Dell. Of course, yuh can't hold a thing like that ag'in' Mott; but it was him—not Crane."

The three were silent for several moments. Then Della looked at both men and spoke softly—

"Is there any news of Tex?"

Biddy shook his head:

"Not a word, Dell. Accordin' to the papers they can't find a trace of him. He made a clean getaway."

"Will he ever come back here, do you think?"

Biddy shook his head slowly.

"No, I don't reckon he will, Dell. It's hard to tell where old Tex will hole-up. He's been out almost a month. Well, I reckon we better be goin', Dell."

They shook hands with her and went outside, heading back to the saloon.

"She sure thinks a lot of old Tex," observed Dick.

Biddy nodded:

"The old crooked-nosed son-of-a-gun. By golly, Dick, he was a danged good feller. They don't make 'em better than Tex Rowland. He was homely as the ——, wasn't he? Kinda like findin' an old bent can, without any label; and when yuh open it up yuh find she's full of peaches. That's old Tex—a peach on the inside."

AT THE doorway of the saloon they met Jack Lohman, the sheriff, whose office was at Welcome, the county seat. He was a tall, squint-eyed man, and as hard as the job he had been voted into.

"Hyah, Lohman," greeted Biddy, as they shook hands. "How's the law and order comin'?"

" 'Sall right," grinned Lohman. "How's crime?"

"Doin' right well. Whatcha doin' down in this neck of the woods?"

"Electioneerin'."

"Thasso?" Biddy grinned widely. "You're startin' early, ain't yuh? You was only re-elected last Fall. I'll bet you're lookin' for Tex Rowland."

Lohman grinned, but grew serious, as he said:

"Kinda funny they never located Tex. Either he's smarter than the law, or he's lucky as ——. They were on his trail within ten minutes after he went out through the gate; but he sure faded complete-like. He don't know nothin', except punchin' cows, and some day he'll be picked up on some cow-ranch."

"It won't be in this end of the country," said Dick. "He wouldn't be fool enough to come back here."

"Suits me," said Lohman. "I ain't got nothin' against Tex. He always treated me fine, and as far as I'm concerned he can stay out of jail. I got a letter from McHague, the warden at the pen, the other day tellin' me to watch out for Tex around here."

"And you'd pick him up in a minute, too," grinned Biddy.

"I wonder if I would," said Lohman seriously.

"That calls for a drink," said Dick warmly. "You ain't on the wagon, are yuh, Lohman? Or mebbe the law don't allow yuh to drink."

"I never swore I wouldn't," laughed Lohman, and they went to the bar together.

Old Rory McPherson did not seem to be having any great luck at poker. He played a hard game, but not a scientific one. He did not bluff; but played every hand for what he thought it was worth.

"I'll not lie," he told them seriously. " 'Tis the Scotch in me, I'm thinkin'."

"It's the rye in yuh, yuh mean," grumbled a disgruntled player, who had tried to bluff the old man out of a good pot, only to find him holding a full-house.

"Rory don't come down here very often, does he?" asked Lohman.

"Not any oftener than he has to," assured Biddy. "He ain't got much use for Antelope. Him and Big Jim ain't friendly, yuh know."

"Too bad," said Lohman. "It kinda splits this country. I was over to the

Lightnin' ranch yesterday. Pablo acted like I wasn't a bit welcome."

"Nobody welcome around there," grinned Biddy. "As far as I'm concerned, they don't need to welcome me. 'Paint' Pablo is loco over pinto horses. I hear he sold a car-load to some circus."

"He's a breed, ain't he?" asked Lohman.

"Nez Perce and French," said Dick, "with the rattle-snake predominatin'."

Lohman laughed and turned back to the bar.

"I'm ridin' out to the Dice ranch today," he said. "Big Jim told me about a horse he had out there, and it's about what I want. He's got some good stock out there, I guess."

"He ought to have," observed Biddy. "He's got enough money to just about raise the kind he wants."

"Yeah, I reckon he gets what he wants," said Lohman.

"He tries, anyway," said Dick. "It's gettin' so a man can't work around here, unless he works for Mott."

"Or for Rory McPherson," laughed Lohman.

"Yeah, that's true," agreed Biddy. "Rainbow Valley ain't as big as Antelope—but it's clean, Lohman."

Some one had come in the saloon as Biddy started to speak, and he turned to see Big Jim Mott looking at him. Mott had heard Biddy's statement, and he seemed about to say something, but changed his mind and came up to the bar.

Big Jim did not belie his name; he was big. He was well over six-feet tall, broad of shoulder and deep of chest, weighing about two hundred and forty pounds. But he was not fat. His face was blocky of contour, his nose a trifle too small for the rest of his face. He was less than forty years of age, but looked to be more, as his close-cropped hair was brushed with gray.

Big Jim dressed well. His linen was immaculate, clothes well pressed and boots shining. A big diamond glistened on a finger of his left hand, while another decorated his necktie. Except for his range clothes, he might be mistaken for a heavyweight politician.

And it would not be a very great mistake, at that. While he did not come out openly in the political field, it was well known that Big Jim Mott's hand was one of the few that stirred the political pot of the state. He had never aspired to office; but was content to sit back and help pull the strings.

The bartender handed out a box of expensive cigars and Big Jim scooped out a handful. He carelessly tossed a bill on to the bar and turned away without asking for his change. Old Rory McPherson had cashed in his chips and was leaving the game, when he looked up and saw Big Jim looking at him.

Big Jim calmly bit the end off a cigar and lighted a match, ignoring the tall Scot who stared at him malevolently. Dick, Biddy and the sheriff grinned in anticipation of the coming clash.

"The coyotes ar-re not all holed up yet, I obser-r-rve," said old Rory distinctly.

Big Jim glanced at him indifferently, but the insult was too direct to ignore completely.

"Were you speaking to me?" he asked.

"Not to ye," said old Rory. "If I did, I would expect ye to bark or howl."

Big Jim's brows drew down over his eyes and the cigar was crushed under the pressure of his big fingers. There was a vast difference in their ages, and he could hardly expect to fight a man of Rory's age.

"You appear to be hunting trouble, McPherson," he said.

"Ye are a man of discernment, Mott."

"You're drunk."

"Am I now? Since when did ye refuse to fight a drunken man?"

Big Jim turned and spoke to the sheriff—

"What would you do in a case of this kind, Lohman?"

Lohman laughed and shook his head.

"My opinion would be worth very little, I reckon."

"The man must be advised," said Rory, looking around the room. "Is there no one to tell him what to do?"

"You are a drunken old fool," said Big Jim slowly. "If you were twenty years younger I'd twist your neck; but you are an old man, and your age saves you."

"A drunken old fool, am I?"

Old Rory's jaw shut tightly and he came toward Big Jim.

The old Scot did not move like an old man. He moved lightly on the balls of his feet, his shoulders hunched slightly. Big Jim looked at him queerly and stepped back, instinctively throwing up his hands in self-defense.

"Too old, am I?" queried the old man between his clenched teeth.

"Stop it, Rory!" ordered the sheriff. "You can't fight here. Have a little sense, can'tcha?"

"Let him go," whispered Biddy. "This is a good chance to show the old man that he ain't what he used to be."

The sheriff had started to step in between them, but now he stopped. The old man was still coming on, his half-shut eyes watching cat-like. Big Jim backed almost to the bar, when the old man sprang forward. It seemed ridiculous for a man of Rory's age to pit himself against a man of Big Jim's size, but that was just what he was doing.

And his first blow splatted against Big Jim's temple, doing little harm, but showing that old Rory had not lost all his skill. Twice more he lashed at Big Jim's head, but the blows only struck the big man's forearms. At that, they must have carried a sting because Big Jim immediately went on the aggressive.

Twice he struck at old Rory; straight-arm punches that were aimed to punish, but the old man snapped aside instead of hurting his arms by blocking the blows. It seemed to surprize Big Jim, who rushed at old Rory, trying to grasp him. But the grasping was not good, and Big Jim suffered a smash on the nose that brought the claret in a stream.

"What did you say about lettin' the old man find out that he wasn't much good?" grunted the amazed sheriff.

Some one flung the table and chairs aside to give more room, and Big Jim proceeded to rush old Rory across the room, trying to pin him against the wall; but the old man sent in a flurry of punches and managed to sidestep the rush.

No one seemed to want to stop the fight now—except Big Jim. His face was gory and his mouth was wide open, as he panted for breath. He was not whipped—not by any manner of means; but his wind was not good, and this old, red-whiskered —— was hard to catch.

"Ye ar-r-re doin' very well consider-r-rin'," said Rory, "but ye would not have it so easy, if ye were not fightin' a dr-r-runken old fool."

The old man was breathing heavily, but was yet unmarked and there was a grin of joy on his thin lips. Big Jim threw all caution to the wind and rushed. He knew that this fight must be finished quickly or he would be disgraced forever. His big fists smashed awkwardly at the retreating face, and he slipped from the effort, throwing himself off balance.

It was old Rory's big chance. Whether or not he was ready to strike the blow anyway is a question, but his swing had started as Big Jim slipped and the clenched fist caught Big Jim flush in the ear, knocking him sidewise, where he collided with a chair and went down heavily.

For a moment there was silence. Then the sheriff spoke—

"He's sure as —— gettin' old and decrepit."

Willing hands were helping Big Jim to his feet, but there was no fight left in him. The blow had upset him, and his fall over the chair had dazed him badly. Old Rory had stepped back, his mop of red hair hanging over his brow like the mane of an old lion.

"Weel," he said huskily, "that brought a cer-r-rtain amount of satisfaction. I may be dr-r-runk and a fool; but I'll na admeet that I'm old. At seexty, a McPherson is in his pr-rime. Biddy if ye please, lad; we'll go home noo."

And Big Jim Mott leaned dazedly against the bar and watched the three men from Rainbow Valley file out of the place. The last to go out was old Rory. He stopped in the doorway and looked back at Jim Mott; looked at him long and steadily before turning and disappearing through the doorway.

"It was an accident, Mr. Mott," said the bartender sympathetically, "that chair——"

"Give me a drink!" snorted Mott, whirling around, still holding to his swollen ear where old Rory's last punch had landed.

"Well, by ——!" snorted one of the men, "I don't know yet how it was done. Why, old Rory is old, I tell yuh."

"That's what I thought," said Big Jim painfully, "I didn't want to hurt him."

"Sure yuh didn't," agreed another, "A feller can't get a reputation for fightin' old men."

"Not his kind," said the sheriff meaningly. "I'll put my money on the old man every time."

Big Jim shot an angry glance at the sheriff, but turned back to his drink. It was a humiliating thing to happen to a man of his standing in the community; a man of his physical size—to be whipped by a man old enough to be his father. He had always hated old Rory McPherson. The old hard-faced Scot and his wild riding crew of punchers had never shown any respect for the man who practically owned and controlled the Antelope country. They gave no allegiance to any one.

Rainbow Valley was always in the "doubtful" column in the politics of the county, where the vote was so small that even one cattle outfit might turn defeat into victory.

The valley was about five miles long by three miles wide, surrounded on two sides by rolling hills, which swept back to the main divide of the Wild Horse mountains. At the northwest end of the valley was a low divide, leading into the Frogpond Basin, a big sheep country. The lower, or southeast, end of the valley opened out onto the flat reaches of the Antelope.

It was about seven miles from the entrance of the valley to the town of Antelope, and Jim Mott's ranch, the Dice brand, was located about three miles slightly southwest of the town. The brand consisted of a square, inside of which were five dots. The brand was registered as the Box-Five-Dot; but it was generally known as the Dice brand.

The XO-Bar-5, which had also been acquired by Big Jim, was located about four miles North of Antelope. Marvin Crane had been known as the owner of the XO-Bar-5 for several years, and it was not generally known that Big Jim was the owner.

BIG JIM finished his drink and then attended to his swollen nose, with the aid of the bartender. The bleeding had stopped, and in a few minutes, barring a slight discoloration, the olfactory organ was as good as ever.

He went down the street to the bank and entered. It was not often that Big Jim came to the bank, although he had a desk in one of the private rooms. He nodded shortly to Frank Eddy, the cashier, who followed him into the private room. Big Jim sat down heavily and lighted a cigar, while Eddy remained standing, waiting for Big Jim to talk.

"Old Rory McPherson wasn't here today, was he?" asked Big Jim.

"No, sir. But two of his men, Clarey and Toole, were in here a while ago."

"Did they talk to Miss Marsh?"

"Yes. They were only here a few minutes, but talked to her all the time."

Big Jim smoked thoughtfully for a while.

"You said something a month ago about Jevne, didn't you?"

Eddy nodded quickly.

"Yes, I did, Mr. Mott. I told you that I did not like Jevne. He is capable and all that, but I do not like his personality."

"How is Miss Marsh?" asked Big Jim, "Is she capable?"

"She is doing well," admitted Eddy. "The work is new to her, of course, but——"

"Give her Jevne's job."

"Jevne's job?" The cashier exploded his astonishment.

"Yes. Fire Jevne. Give him a month's pay and let him go. Then put Miss Marsh in his place."

"But she is not capable of doing an assistant cashier's work, Mr. Mott."

"You are capable of teaching her—or I can find men who will."

Eddy nodded slowly. He knew there was no use arguing with Big Jim Mott.

"It will be rather new," said Eddy slowly. "But I suppose she will be able to do the work. How soon shall I notify her?"

"Send her in here, Eddy."

"Yes, sir."

In a few moments Della Marsh came in, wondering what Big Jim Mott could wish of her. He held out his hand and she smiled shyly as their hands met.

"Did you see your uncle today?" asked Big Jim.

"No, I did not, Mr. Mott."

"I see. Do you like your work here, Miss Marsh?"

"Why, yes."

"Jevne is leaving today," said Big Jim slowly, looking at her intently.

She looked at him inquiringly and he continued—

"You will take his job, Miss Marsh."

"I—you mean that I am to take Mr. Jevne's position?"

"As assistant cashier, Miss Marsh. You are entirely capable, and Mr. Eddy will teach you what you don't already know. No, don't thank me."

"Well, I do not know what to say," said Della a trifle nervously. "It is quite a jump from trimming hats to——"

"I believe in wide jumps," laughed Big Jim. "You will be able to do the work, Della. You don't mind if I call you Della, do you? I've known you by that name for a long time, and Miss Marsh is too much like talking to a stranger. You may call me Jim, if you care to."

"No, I—I don't think I would mind," she stammered. "But I don't think I could ever call you anything except Mr. Mott. You do not seem like a man who could be called by his given name."

Big Jim laughed at her and held out his hand:

"You may change your mind, Della. I congratulate you on your new job. That is all for today."

He followed her out into the bank, where he turned her over to the cashier, and went out to his horse. He caressed his sore ear as he squinted off across the hills toward Rainbow Valley.

"You dirty old Scotch pup!" he muttered half-aloud. "I'll break you, if it's the last thing I ever do."

He yanked his horse around savagely and rode out of town at a gallop.

And while Big Jim rode toward home, with a heart filled with rage and bitterness, old Rory and his two cowboys headed back into Rainbow Valley, where the lowering sun threw the purple shadows of the high hills across their road. Cattle moved lazily along the cottonwood-bordered streams, or straggled off the hills, heading down into the valley, looking curiously at the three riders as they passed.

And most of them wore the brand of Rory McPherson—the RMP—which caused many to refer to Rory's outfit as the Royal Mounted Police. He was not as rich in stock as was Big Jim, but the RMP had the better range.

There had been little conversation on the return trip. Old Rory rode silently, his eyes half-shut against the glare of the sun. Dick and Biddy said nothing, although they exulted inwardly over the outcome of the fight. It would be worth the telling.

"Big Jim owns the XO-Bar-5, I hear," said Biddy, as they passed the road leading to that ranch.

Old Rory nodded slowly, his shoulders drooping a trifle more.

"Aye, he does that, Biddy. He owned it at the time they sent poor Tex to prison. Did ye hear any more news of Tex in town?"

"Not a word," said Dick. "If they'd 'a' caught him, some one would have heard it."

"I'd sure like to hear Tex tell what happened," said Dick. "The papers said that Tex hit the warden when the warden's hands were up; but that's a —— lie. Tex wouldn't do that to save his own life. I dunno why they always have to lie about a thing like that."

"I don't know," said old Rory sadly. "There's always more lies than truth in the wor-r-rld. Ye know how I felt toward Tex. He was like me own son. They took him away, so they did. I hoped that Tex and Della would marry—and they would. They would get Rainbow Valley. Della is all I have in the wor-r-rld of me own flesh and blood—and I haven't her now."

Biddy squinted sidewise at the old man's face. There was none of the "Fighting McPherson" about him now. He was an old, old man, with tired eyes; eyes that might have been moist from staring into the sunlight.

"I reckon it's fate," said Biddy softly.

The old man with the tired eyes faded, and in their place came the tensed expression, the thin line of set lips, the jutting, red-bearded jaw. He looked at Biddy thoughtfully for a moment, then turned and looked straight ahead as he spurred his horse savagely.

"Fate, ——!" he snorted.

And while both factions were heading home, Della Marsh, the new assistant cashier of the Antelope bank, sat down on the porch of the little milliner's home and tried to puzzle it all out. In her hands was a belated letter, from the State Pardon Board, which she had just finished reading. It said, in part:

> Your petition, signed by a sufficient number of names, for the release of Tex Rowland from our penal institution, is herewith returned. Owing to his escape a short time ago, no official action was taken by us.

The little milliner came down the path and turned in at the gate. Della handed her the letter, which she read slowly and gave back.

"And they wouldn't never pardon him now, if he is caught," she said sadly. "You worked so hard to get all those names, Della. Why, even Big Jim Mott signed it, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's just like a man to escape when he is almost ready to walk out free."

"But Tex didn't know it, Miss Freeland."

"No, I suppose not, Della; but he might have stayed a while longer. I never trust a man—not any man. Did you see your uncle?"

"No, he didn't come over to the bank."

"He came to see me and I told him where to find you."

"What did he say, Miss Freeland?"

"I'd not repeat it."

Della laughed softly, in spite of the fact that laughter was far from her at that moment.

"I have been promoted to assistant cashier of the bank," she stated.

"You have? To assistant cashier? Wasn't Mr. Jevne the——"

"Yes. Mr. Mott gave me Mr. Jevne's position. They let him go."

"Well, that's nice," said Miss Freeland, but a trifle dubiously. "You—well, I'd hate to have so much responsibility. You'll have to deal with men all the time, and I wouldn't like that. Let's get supper, Della. I bought some canned fish for supper. I didn't know whether you liked it or not; but I felt just like a fish."

A smile chased across Della's lips, but she did not reply, as she got to her feet and followed the little milliner into the house.

IV

PAINT PABLO was not a pleasant sort of a gentleman. In fact, it is stretching the imagination considerably even to speak of him as a gentleman. It is also doubtful whether Pablo ever laid any claims to the appellation.

He was about five feet five inches in height, fairly wide of girth for such a short person, and with an evil, pock-marked face. His little brown eyes were close together, his nose little more than a blob of flesh, his mouth crooked and badly in need of a dentist.

Still, he thought well of Mr. Pablo. He had a passion for pinto horses. His four cowboys, "Tucson Charley," Mose Dickey, "Pokey" Speed—who had been christened Polk—and Mike John all rode painted ponies.

Tucson Charley's mother had been a Piute, his father a Spaniard. Mose Dickey's paternal ancestors were unknown to him. Pokey boasted Irish and Mexican blood, while Mike John's blood was a mixture of Yaqui and Basque.

It was an aggregation to be proud of, and Paint Pablo was proud of them. So variegated was everything about the ranch that it was commonly known as the "Paint Pot." It was located across the Antelope range from the mouth of Rainbow Valley, and about ten miles in a straight line northeast from the town of Antelope.

That Paint Pablo was dishonest, there was no doubt in the minds of Antelope and Rainbow Valley folks. But he had never been caught. If there was a hold-up within miles of that country, Pablo and his crew were under suspicion. But Pablo did not mind. He went along in his own dumb way, caring little what any one thought about him.

His ranch house was a huddle of unpainted shacks in a grove of cottonwoods, sitting high enough on the hill to overlook much of the country. Paint Pablo did not build up there for the view.

And it was at this Paint Pot ranch that Bill Smith, erstwhile Tex Rowland, Number 1733, made his first stop on his return to Antelope. He rode in on a jaded gray horse, cheap saddle and a bridle that was little more than a leather thong.

He had managed to scrape together an outfit of cowboy raiment, belt, gun and a small stock of ammunition. Pablo was sitting in the shade of a cottonwood, putting a hondo on his rope, when Bill Smith rode in and dismounted.

He had known Pablo for years, and felt that Pablo would recognize him, if such a thing was possible. But there was no sign of recognition in his little eyes; only suspicion of this handsome cowpuncher. Pablo was no conversationalist. He grunted softly and continued to work on his rope.

Bill Smith grinned and rolled a cigaret.

"What outfit is this?" he asked.

Pablo grunted, spat thoughtfully, and drew the lightning sign in the dust with his forefinger.

"Lightnin', eh?" queried Bill.

"Um-m."

"You know Rory McPherson?"

"—— right."

"You know Big Jim Mott?"

Pablo shifted uneasily.

"Um-m."

"You know Tex Rowland?"

Pablo looked up quickly, a glint of suspicion in his eyes.

"You officer?" he asked.

"Nope. Tex was my friend."

"Um-m. What you want?"

"Job."

"You look for Tex?"

"Not so you'd notice it. I need a job, and I was just wonderin' if McPherson could put me to work."

Pablo squinted closely at him.

"You been sick? You pretty —— white skin."

"Yeah, I been sick," grinned Bill Smith, "Almost died."

"Too bad. I was sick once. Wood alcohol! —— near die, too."

"What about that job?" asked Bill.

Pablo shook his head and went to work on his rope.

"No job here," he declared, "I got too much help. Mebbe Jim Mott give you job; mebbe McPherson give you job—I dunno."

"Got a horse yuh want to trade?"

Pablo took a quick glance at the skinny gray and shook his head. He was not interested in anything but painted horses. Bill Smith threw away his cigaret, told Pablo good-by and rode on toward Antelope.

He was satisfied now that no one would recognize him. If he escaped the keen eyes of Pablo, there was little chance of any one discovering that Tex Rowland was back of that handsome face. It was going to be difficult for him to pose as a stranger in a place where he knew every one. He was beginning to get used to his new face and name. It would be like coming back from the grave to hear himself discussed, and he felt sure that he would soon know what folks thought about him.

He rode into Antelope and tied his horse to a hitch-rack. It did not seem to him that he had ever been away from the old town. Old Ase Bradley, who owned a general store, was sitting on the same old bench in front of the store, chewing tobacco and arguing politics with a couple of old cronies.

Pete Sutherland, the blacksmith, was swearing audibly at a broncho that wouldn't stand still. Pete always swore at them, whether they stood still or not. It was a habit with him. A girl was coming out of the bank, and Bill Smith stood silently watching her.

It was Della Marsh, coming straight toward him; Della Marsh, the girl he was to have married. He stared at her hungrily. It was the supreme test of his disguise. She glanced at him without recognition and passed on into a restaurant. Bill Smith sighed deeply and walked slowly on. For the first time since his recovery he realized that even Della would not know him.

And that moment he realized that he was a stranger to everybody—everywhere. He was the only living person who knew who he was. The gods of fate had created a full grown human being; created a creature which had no past.

"My ——!" exclaimed Bill Smith to himself, "I dunno whether I'm winner in this game or not. I can't claim relationship with anybody on earth. I was born in a train wreck, where a lot of folks died—and among them was Tex Rowland. I'm just a ghost, tha'sall."

No one spoke to him in the Fashion Saloon. There were men he had known intimately for years; men who were his friends. They looked at him and saw only the good-looking puncher, a trifle run down as to raiment, a stranger to Antelope.

Big Jim Mott was there, playing poker. He glanced at the stranger and went on with his game. Bill Smith bought himself a drink. It was the first one he had drunk since his arrest. He questioned the bartender about the cattle ranches, intimating that he was looking for a job. The bartender advised him to see Big Jim. Bill Smith grinned to himself. It seemed ridiculous for the bartender not to know him.

Marvin Crane was also in the poker game. He was a thin-faced, swarthy-complectioned, middle-aged man, who was continually blinking his eyes. It was Crane who had sworn to the complaint charging Tex Rowland with the theft of six XO-Bar-5 horses.

Some one had corralled the horses in an old pole-corral in a coulée, several miles from the XO-Bar-5 ranch-house, and with the six XO-Bar-5 horses was a RMP mare which Tex had been looking for.

Tex had dismounted and was inside the corral, rope in hand, when Crane and "Slim" Whelan, his cowpuncher, rode up. Tex had noticed that the animals were covered with sweat and were weary from a long run; but gave it no thought.

He was also unaware that just outside the little corral were the preparations for a branding-fire, which had been recently put together. There was also the rod from the end-gate of a wagon, which, in all probability, was to be used as a running-iron to change the brands.

In range parlance—Tex was caught with the goods. Crane and Whelan covered him with their guns, disarmed Tex and took him to the sheriff. There had been too much horse-stealing in the Antelope country for the law to deal lightly; so Tex had been convicted.

Bill Smith, erstwhile Tex, loafed around the saloon until the poker game broke up, and then approached Big Jim Mott. Luck had smiled upon Big Jim and his grin was expansive.

"Want a job, eh?" he asked jovially. "What can you do?"

"Anythin' from wranglin' broncs to runnin' the ranch," replied Bill Smith.

"Well, you're not a bit modest," laughed Big Jim. "Where are you from and what is your name?"

"Are you hirin' pedigrees or punchers?" asked Bill.

Big Jim laughed and turned to Crane—

"You can use another man, can't you, Crane?"

"I might." Crane was not enthusiastic.

"I'm filled up at my ranch," explained Big Jim. "Got more punchers than I know what to do with; so I'll let Crane have you. He needs another man. Got a horse?"

"I've got somethin' with four legs and a tail," grinned Bill. "It ain't a bronc."

They walked outside and he pointed out his gray at the hitch-rack across the street. Big Jim laughed and went toward the bank, while Bill Smith and Crane crossed to the rack and got their horses.

Crane was not strong on conversation, and Bill wondered why Big Jim had hired him to work on the XO-Bar-5. He did not know that Big Jim owned that outfit, but he was beginning to think so.

"Does the big feller own your ranch?" he asked.

Crane nodded jerkily.

"Yeah. That's Big Jim Mott. Didn't yuh ever hear of him?"

"What did he ever do?"

"Oh, ——! I dunno. He owns most of this country."

"Got lots of money?"

"Yeah. Owns the bank in Antelope and helps run the State."

"Looks like a fighter."

Crane laughed grimly, but did not express any opinion. He had heard of Big Jim's fight with old Rory McPherson.

"I came in from that direction," said Bill, pointing northeast, "and I ran into the Lightnin'-brand ranch. Had a talk with the jeezer that owns it. That is, I tried to have a talk with him. He sure is short on conversation."

"That was Paint Pablo," said Crane. "—— Injun!"

"He ain't very ornamental, that's a cinch," grinned Bill.

"No, and yuh don't want to trust him too far, either. Say, I don't even know your name."

"William H. Smith."

Crane spat dryly and nodded.

"Bill Smith, eh? You don't look like none of the Smith family I've ever seen. Where yuh been workin', Smith?"

"You don't expect me to answer that, do yuh?"

Crane grinned and bit a corner off his plug of tobacco.

"All right. If anybody asks me, I'll say yuh hails from Oklahoma, or from some other seaport. Yuh look honest."

"Since when did cow-ranches require a puncher to look honest, Crane."

"All right, all right, Smith. You ain't no mail-order puncher, that's a cinch. You'll bunk with Slim Whelan. He's a forked gent, with a salty disposition, and kinda addicted to solitaire. I hate two-handed games; so I don't play with Slim. Mebbe he'll take exceptions to your looks; but I reckon yuh can take care of William H. Smith."

"I've raised him ever since he was born," grinned Bill.

"And that wasn't yesterday," agreed Crane warmly.

"Nope—it was several weeks ago."

"I betcha."

Slim Whelan met them at the gate, which sagged on its hinges so badly that Slim fairly had to carry it open. He squinted at the newcomer and waited for Crane to introduce him.

"I used t' know a Smith," he said innocently, "and I wonder if you're related to him."

"He was my brother," said Bill seriously. "Kind of a queer sort of a jigger, with two legs, two arms and a head on top of his neck."

"By ——, that's him!" exclaimed Slim. "You shore described him in a few words. And I'll bet yo're jist like the cowboy in the story-book—you love your horse."

Bill looked at the weary-legged gray and nodded slowly—

"Yeah, I think so much of that animal that I wouldn't even try to sell him."

"And that saddle, too!" said Slim, "Didja win that at a rodeo?"

"That," said Bill seriously, "that was the saddle that George Washington used when he crossed the Delaware. It's a heirloom."

Crane laughed loudly and slapped Slim on the back.

"I'll match him agin' yuh any old time, Slim. Bill H. Smith ain't no pandowdy puncher. He's hired to help yuh run the legs off our cows; *sabe?* Be good to him—cause I want yuh to keep your health, Slim."

"My ——, yuh talk like I wasn't kind to everybody!"

Slim seemed aggrieved to think that Crane would even question his sweet disposition.

"I never seen yuh bitin' the legs off yaller-jackets nor ticklin' the teeth of a rattler—if that's what yuh mean, Slim. You show Smith where to lean his horse, will yuh? I'll give yuh some blankets for that other bunk, and Smith can fill the tick with fresh straw."

Crane went to the ranch-house, while Slim led Bill down to the stable and pointed out an empty stall. As they came outside Slim squinted at Bill and said:

"Dog-gone it, yore voice reminds me of somebody I've heard talkin'. I dunno who it was, but it's familiar."

"Prob'ly that other Smith you knowed, Slim."

Slim looked at him quizzically and laughed shortly—

"Yeah, I reckon that's who it was. Do they all talk alike?"

"All I ever knowed, except one, Slim."

"How'd he talk?"

"Through his nose."

Slim's face was very serious as he digested this mentally:

"Well, there's exceptions to all cases, I reckon. I'll show yuh where to fill that straw-tick. I'm glad yuh come to work here, Smith. We sure need another man here."

"Plenty of work, eh?" queried Bill Smith.

"No-o-o, not much work. But we've got twenty hens that are layin' every day, and the —— aigs are spoilin' on us."

IT WAS near closing time at the bank on the following day. Della's head was aching from trying to absorb knowledge of the banking business, and she was almost ready to slam down the top of her desk and run away into the hills. It was all so complicated, and Eddy had tried to teach her the whole system in one day. Consequently her mind was awhirl.

Big Jim came in and leaned on her desk, puffing away at his cigar, a grin on his lips.

"Learning the game, Della?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know what I've learned," she said nervously. "It is all Greek to me yet. I don't think I'll ever understand what it is all about."

"I don't understand it," he laughed. "Too much for me."

"Why did you give me this position?" she asked.

Big Jim laughed and squinted at his cigar thoughtfully.

"Well, I thought you needed a good job, and," he lowered his voice and leaned closer, "I wanted to have you around, Della."

"Wanted to have me around?" Wonderingly.

"Sure. I wanted to have the prettiest girl in the State working for me. You are pretty, Della."

She looked down at her desk and began arranging papers. It was clear to her now that Big Jim Mott did not hire her because of her ability. She knew that he was looking down at her, but she did not look up.

"I suppose those papers were not sufficiently shuffled," he laughed softly. "You've got pretty hair, Della."

Still she did not look up; so he laughed and went back to his private room. Eddy, the cashier, was locking the vault, and now he came up to her.

"Closing time, Miss Marsh," he said pleasantly. "You may go now. I suppose it has been a hard day."

"Rather a confusing day," she said wearily, as she put on her hat. "I shall dream of banking terms, I suppose."

"I have," he confessed. "But later on it will be all in a day's work."

She went out and he locked the door behind her. A man was coming down the sidewalk toward her, and she recognized him as the one they called Tucson Charley. She merely gave him a glance as she started across the street. He was more Indian than white in looks and garb.

As she reached the sidewalk and started up the street, she happened to glance back and saw that Tucson Charley was following her. Perhaps, she thought, he was merely coming up to one of the stores. But he turned down a side path, following her straight to the home of the little milliner.

Della was not afraid of him, but she was curious to know why he was following her. On the steps of the little house she stopped and waited for him to come up. He glanced around, as if wondering if any one was watching him, before coming up to her.

"What do you want?" she asked.

He dug inside his dirty shirt and brought out a begrimed envelope, which he passed to her. There was no name on the envelope. She looked at it curiously, noting that it was sealed.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You open," he said shortly.

Wonderingly she tore one end off the envelope and drew out a folded piece of paper. The writing on it had been done with a soft lead-pencil and was barely legible. Quickly she glanced at the signature on it and gave a gasp of surprize. It was signed—

Tex.

"Where did you get this?" she asked hoarsely.

Tucson Charley shook his head and looked blankly.

She stared at him for several moments then read the note,

> Dell I want to see you but I'm afraid to show myself. I have been hurt but am able to travel again. I need money to get me out of the country and don't know where I can get it. I need about $500. Don't tell anybody about this because the officers are close on my trail. You can trust the man who brings this. Just sign your name on this so I will know you got it. You will hear from me again. TEX.

She crushed the letter in her hands. Never for a moment did she question the authorship of the note. She had never seen any of Tex Rowland's writing. But she did know that Tex Rowland, the man she loved, was hiding away in that country, recovering from injuries, and badly in need of money.

"Where is he?" she asked hoarsely.

Tucson Charley shook his head. Either he did not know, or would not say.

She read it through again before taking a pencil from her little bag. He had only asked her to write her name, but above the name she wrote:

> Tex, I love you in spite of everything.

Quickly she put the message into the envelope, gave it back to the half-breed and watched him walk back toward the main street. She wanted to follow him and ask more questions about Tex; but she knew that Tucson Charley would not talk. She knew that Tucson Charley worked for Pablo, at the Paint Pot ranch, and wondered if Tex were hiding out there.

It was not like Tex to ask her for money. But under the circumstances she was about the only one he could ask for help. Her pocket-book revealed the fact that she had just twelve dollars. It was out of the question for her to get the five hundred dollars for him.

She did not confide in Miss Freeland that night. It would be like trusting the news to a reporter. Miss Freeland's tongue was of the hinged variety, and no secret was sacred to her. The next morning she went back to the bank, still wondering what she could do to help Tex.

It was difficult for her to get interested in the work. The room seemed hot and stuffy, and her head ached slightly. Some men were talking to the cashier about some accident, and she heard the name of Tucson Charley used several times.

As soon as the men went away she asked the cashier about it.

"One of Pablo's cowboys," he said. "They call him Tucson Charley, I think. Anyway, he got drunk last night and his horse kicked him in the head. He likely went out to the hitch-rack and fell into the horse. They found him there this morning."

"Dead?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes."

The cashier went back to his work, while Della slumped back in her chair, her mind awhirl. They would find that letter on Tucson Charley, and it would lead them to Tex Rowland. She knew that Tucson Charley had never delivered that letter to Tex.

It was some time before she could control her nerves sufficiently to ask the cashier more details. But he knew no more than he had told her, except that the body had been turned over to old Paint Pablo for burial.

"Didn't they notify the sheriff," she asked, "or the coroner?"

"I don't think so, Miss Marsh. You see, it was a accident; so there was nothing to interest the law. Doctor Sibley examined him, and they all decided that the horse kicked him."

"But why don't they bury him here at the town cemetery?" she asked.

"Nobody wanted to assume the responsibility, I suppose. He has no relatives around here. Some of the boys have taken him out to Pablo's ranch in a wagon."

The cashier went to attend to a customer's wants, and Della made a pretense of working. She felt that there was a bare possibility of no one finding that letter on Tucson Charley. As long as the sheriff or coroner had not been notified, it was hardly likely that any one would search the corpse.

It was nearly noon when Big Jim rode into town and came to the bank. Della was suffering from a severe headache and he noticed that she did not look well.

"You look awful pale," he told her. Don't you feel well?"

"Just a bad headache," she told him wearily. "The figures get all tangled up in my brain somehow."

"Say, you sift out of here and go home," he ordered. "You ain't in shape to work, Della."

He walked over and explained it to the cashier, who apologized to Della for not sending her home earlier in the day. She was more than glad to leave the bank. Big Jim went outside with her, offering advice in the cure of headaches.

"You ought to take a ride into the hills," he said. "You've been working too hard. I tell you what to do: You go to the livery stable and tell 'em I said to let you have a good saddle-horse. Pick out the best one there for today, and after this I'll see that there's a good horse kept there for you."

"But I couldn't do that," she protested.

"Yes, you can, too. It's the least I can do for you, Della. If I wasn't so busy today, I'd ride with you. I'll try and ride with you once in a while, after today. Now you run along and get that horse. Tell Johnny Harris to put it on my bill. No, don't tell him anything, Della. You get the horse, and I'll see Johnny later."

The temptation was too great for Della. For years she had ridden the hills; riding as wild and free as any cowpuncher, and it had been as much a part of her life as eating and sleeping. She took the horse down to Miss Freeland's house, where she made a swift change into her riding clothes.

But her clothes were hardly conventional; according to riding academy standards. A pair of overalls, light flannel shirt, boots and a sombrero completed the outfit. She owned a .30-30 Winchester carbine, a gift from old Rory McPherson, but decided against taking it with her. On account of its recoil, she had never quite mastered it although she shot fairly well.

At a short distance away she could easily be mistaken for a slim, young cowpuncher, as she rode out of Antelope, heading north into the rolling hills. She was taking the shortest distance to the Paint Pot ranch, and intended to keep away from the road for fear of meeting those who had taken the remains of Tucson Charley to Pablo's place.

V

THE XO-Bar-5 was sort of a run-down place, and Martin Crane seemed to expend little effort in keeping it going. A half-breed woman, Alice Spotted Horse, did the cooking—or what passed for cooking. Alice was very fat, slow of foot and heavy of hand, and expressed every emotion with the same exclamation:

"I be ——!"

"She's a elocutionist," declared Slim, after Alice had used up her vocabulary on acknowledging her introduction to Bill Smith.

Alice grinned blandly and repeated herself. Bill praised her cooking and asked her why in —— she ever put flour in her soda-biscuits. They were as yellow as saffron and fairly sizzled with their soda content. Alice thought Bill was praising her cooking and it pleased her mightily.

"You jiggers let Alice alone," ordered Crane. "She's all right."

"But not for cookin'," declared Slim. "She's too danged thoughtful." And then to Bill:

"About six months ago she seen Crane take a spoonful of soda for indigestion. He was sufferin' quite a lot and it fixed him up fine. Since then she's dumped soda into everythin' she cooked. By golly, I stirred my coffee the other mornin' and it blew up in my face. She'd loaded it with soda, I reckon."

Crane laughed and called to Alice:

"Never mind what they say, Alice. Yore cookin' keeps me in shape."

"I be ——!" said Alice blankly.

"Aw, she appreciates praise all right," said Slim laughing. "When yuh goin' to get married, Alice?"

"Huh!" Alice snorted and turned her back.

"She's got a sweetheart," grinned Slim, "Tucson Charley. You don't know Tucson Charley, Smith. He works for Pablo. Him and Annie are goin' to get married some day. I dunno what she can see in that cock-eyed breed; but love beats ——, don't it?"

"It sure does," said Bill Smith slowly. "I reckon a cock-eyed half-breed can love. He sees things different than me and you, Slim; so we hadn't ought to laugh at him."

"Aw, I ain't laughin' at him," protested Slim. "I *sabe* that he thinks Alice is as cute as a hair-trigger on a cannon. I've been in love, and I sure appreciate the feelin', Smith."

Slim leaned back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling:

"She was a village maiden, Smith. Her eyes were like jet and her hair was like——"

"Oh, for ——'s sake, don't tell it!" exploded Crane. "You make me itch for a gun every time yuh start it."

"Does he tell it often?" queried Bill Smith.

"Every time he finds somebody that'll listen."

Slim laughed and fumbled for his cigaret-makings.

"I'll slip it to yuh sometime when Crane ain't around, Smith. It sure is a dinger of a recitation. Yuh can make it fit any girl."

Bill Smith nodded seriously and got up from the table.

"You scare that gray bronc into the hills and help yourself to a decent animal," said Crane, as they went outside. "There's a tall roan down there that's broke to everythin' except a rope and a gun. Yuh might teach him a few things.

"There's a good saddle down in the bunk-house, too. That hull you rode in here is liable to fall apart and leave yuh settin' down. You might as well go with Slim over to the Paint Pot and see Pablo today. Pablo's got about a hundred white-faced cows, which Big Jim wants, and I've got to try and buy 'em cheap. If Pablo knows that Big Jim wants 'em, he'll jump the price; *sabe?*"

"All right," agreed Bill Smith, "but if he don't talk more than he did yesterday, we'll never know whether we've bought somethin' or not."

"He'll talk to Slim."

"Yeah, he'll talk to me," laughed Slim. "But I'll betcha we'll never get a short price on them white-faced cows. Pablo thinks they're pintos."

They saddled and rode off across the hills toward the Paint Pot ranch. Bill Smith had taken the tall roan, a half-broken, hammer-headed brute, which wanted to hurdle every thing in sight. Slim grinned in appreciation of Bill's horsemanship.

"That roan made me do a hoolihan," he confided. "Crane thought he could fork it, and he ate his meals standin' up for a few days. If he ever starts doin' his worm-fence, you'll know you've been well-mounted; but I reckon you've forked 'em before."

It was about eight miles to the Paint Pot, and by the time they had covered that distance the roan was willing to take its time.

They found Pablo and Mike John sitting against the shady side of the old ranch-house, hugging their knees. Both of them squinted at the two cowpunchers but did not get up. Mose Dickey came around the corner of the house, halted at sight of Slim and Bill, and leaned wearily against the corner.

Slim squatted on his heels in front of Pablo and rolled a cigaret. He had not spoken; neither had Pablo nor his men. The Indian blood predominated in their actions, and Slim knew them well enough to appreciate this fact. Bill Smith squatted down and offered his tobacco to Pablo, but it was refused.

"Well, what do yuh know, Pablo?"

queried Slim, after a long interval of silence.

Pablo spat and rubbed his chin. Then—

"Tucson Charley dead."

"Huh?"

Slim removed his cigaret slowly, wonderingly.

"Deader'n ——!" said Mike John.

"Tucson Charley dead?" grunted Slim.

"—— right!" grunted Pablo nodding violently.

"Pretty —— dead," observed Mose Dickey without emotion.

"Sounds like a settled fact," observed Bill Smith.

"What killed Tucson Charley?" asked Slim.

"Horse kick 'm," said Pablo.

"Men say horse kill 'm," corrected Mose Dickey.

"Um-m," said Pablo.

" 'Pears to be a difference of opinion, Slim," observed Bill.

Pablo got to his feet and motioned for them to follow him. They filed into the house where they viewed the remains of Tucson Charley, laid out on a sagging cot, covered with a gaudy blanket.

"He's dead," said Pablo softly.

"Deader'n ——!" said Mike John, with finality.

"Where did it happen, Pablo?" asked Slim, as Bill Smith made a close examination of the dead man's head.

"Antelope."

Pablo hooked his thumbs over his belt and nodded slowly:

"Charley he go town yest'day. Men say he got —— drunk. I guess that right, too. Find 'm this morning by hitch-rack."

"Pretty —— dead," added Mose Dickey.

"Got drunk, fell into the bronc and got kicked in the head, eh?" said Slim.

"Men say so," agreed Pablo."

"His horse?" asked Bill Smith.

"—— right," nodded Pablo. "Men bring horse, too."

"Where's the horse?" asked Bill Smith.

"Jus' pinto horse," said Mose Dickey. "Down by corral."

He jerked his thumb in that direction.

Slim and Bill walked outside and looked down toward the tumble-down corral, where the pinto horse was still tied to the fence.

"Let's take a look at it, Slim," suggested Bill.

Pablo and Mose Dickey followed them down and watched Bill Smith throw his sombrero at the pinto's heels. The animal jumped ahead, whirled and pulled back, but did not kick. Bill spoke softly to the animal, moved in close and soothed it. After working around it for a while he was able to examine its hoofs.

"That's a pretty good horse, Pablo," said Bill after he had finished his examination.

Pablo grinned and nodded quickly. There were four more pinto horses inside the corral and Bill looked them over.

"You like pinto horses?" asked Pablo.

"Yeah, I like 'em—in a circus," replied Bill seriously.

"I sell you good one—mebbe," said Pablo.

"Mebbe," grinned Bill.

They went back to the house and squatted in the shade, but this time Pablo accepted Bill Smith's tobacco.

"You got plenty white-faced cows, Pablo," said Slim. "Market bad now. Meat not much good, skin small price. How much you want for white-faced cows?"

Pablo thought this over for quite a while, alternately squinting at Slim and looking down at the ground. Then, his decision:

"No trade now. Too sad, you *sabe?* Gotta bury Tucson Charley."

"Sure," agreed Slim. "We talk 'nother time, eh?"

"Um-m."

"Goin' to have a preacher, ain't yuh?" asked Bill Smith.

"What for preacher?" queried Pablo blankly.

"They don't *sabe* that," said Slim before Bill had a chance to explain. "Let's go home before they wish a shovel on to us."

They got on their horses and rode away, without even saying good-by to the Paint Pot outfit.

"No use talkin' business to 'em," stated Slim. "They're all in mournin' now, don'tcha know it? I *sabe* 'em, Smith. They don't act a danged bit mournful but, I'll tell yuh right now, they feel bad. Mebbe they're just a tough bunch of *hombres*, but they've been together a long time and this hits' em hard. Tucson Charley wasn't worth the rope it would take to hang him; but right now they all think he was the finest jigger that ever lifted a cow-critter."

W THEY swung out through a coulée, cutting across a hog-back ridge, when Slim drew up his horse and looked back. A rider was swinging in toward the ranch, coming from the south. The rider was only about five hundred yards away, traveling slowly.

"By golly, I'll betcha that's Della Marsh!" exclaimed Slim, and then turned to explain who Della Marsh was.

"That horse belongs to the livery-stable in Antelope," declared Slim, "and Della Marsh works for the bank down there. Now, what in —— is she doin' at the Paint Pot?"

"We better go back there and find out, eh?" suggested Bill Smith, "That's no place for a girl, Slim."

"We'll sure do that little thing—and it ain't. C'mon."

They turned and rode back in a hurry. The girl had dismounted and was talking to Pablo. She looked curiously at them, as they rode up and swung off their horses. Their coming had put her in an embarrassing position, and even Pablo grinned sourly at them.

"We seen yuh comin,' Della," said Slim, "and I wanted yuh to meet my friend Smith."

They looked at each other for several moments and Della held out her hand to Bill Smith.

"I am glad to meet you," she said softly, as their hands met.

Bill Smith mumbled something. He hardly knew what he was saying, because it seemed so ridiculous to be introduced to a girl he had known for years. Unconsciously he squeezed her hand and she drew away from him.

"How come you ride away out here, Della?" asked Slim.

"Why—" she brushed a lock of hair away from her eyes and smiled at him—

"I don't know. It just happened, I suppose."

"She want see Tucson Charley," offered Pablo blandly. "She know he dead."

"Yes, I heard he had been killed," said Della quickly.

"She want look in his pocket," stated Mose Dickey.

"Huh?" Slim was interested.

Della flushed for a moment, but her cheeks grew pale. She did not want to tell Slim and this stranger what she expected to find in Tucson Charley's pockets.

"Look in his pocket?" muttered Slim wonderingly. "What for?"

"She no say," Pablo shook his head.

Slim turned to Della—

"Has Tucson Charley got somethin' in his pocket that yuh want?"

"I——"

She hesitated for a moment. She could hardly tell it all to Slim Whelan, because Slim was one of the men who had sent Tex to the penitentiary. Still, she had known Slim for years, and liked him.

"I don't know," she finished truthfully.

"Well, by golly, we'll sure find out!" blurted Slim and went into the house.

Pablo acted as if he might object to this, but let it pass. He knew that Slim would not take kindly to objections.

Della made no move to follow Slim; so Bill Smith stayed with her. Pablo went to the doorway and watched inside, while Slim made a search of the corpse.

"You work in the bank, Miss Marsh?" asked Bill.

"Yes," nervously watching the doorway.

"Bank belongs to Mott, don't it?"

She nodded shortly. Slim was coming out, rubbing his hands on his hips. The job had not been to his liking.

"Ain't got a thing in his pockets, Della," he declared, "I even felt inside his shirt-front, and I'm plumb glad that my folks never raised me to be an undertaker."

"Nothing in his pockets."

Della squinted painfully. It meant that some one had that note. She looked at the blank expression on Pablo's face, wondering whether or not he knew about Tex. She felt that Tucson Charley would hardly know it alone.

"You better set down on the steps, Della," urged Slim. "You look so dog-gone white around the gills."

"I'm all right," she protested, "I—I think I will go now."

She turned to her horse and Slim helped her mount.

"We'll ride down the road a ways with yuh, Della," said Slim. "We're goin' in that direction."

She rode slowly away and they overtook her in a short distance.

"You hadn't ought to come out here alone, Della," said Slim. "Pablo and his gang may be all right, but it ain't no place for a girl to come alone."

Della nodded, but did not reply. Slim

lifted himself in his stirrups and glanced back toward the Paint Pot as he swung his horse in closer to her.

"Listen here, Dell," he said softly, "you can trust me and Smith. Tell us what Tucson Charley had that you wanted, and we'll get it just as sure as —— made little apples."

"You couldn't, Slim," she replied. "Whoever has it will keep it, I think."

"Not if I know what it is," declared Slim. "Tell us what to look for, Della."

Della stared at the bobbing ears of her horse and tried to make up her mind what to say. Some one had that note. It would be no secret now, unless it fell into the hands of some one who was a friend of Tex Rowland. Perhaps, she thought, that note was already on its way to the sheriff. There was a big reward offered for Tex, payable on information that would lead to his recapture.

She knew that Slim had not helped to send Tex to the prison on any personal grievance. They had been friends for a long time, and Slim was only doing what any other cattleman would have done.

"Yuh goin' to tell us?" queried Slim.

"I think I will, Slim," she said slowly. "Tucson Charley brought me a note yesterday. I scribbled a line on it and gave it back to him to return to the man who wrote it. I know that Tucson Charley did not return it, and I thought he might still have it in his pockets."

"I kinda understand," nodded Slim. "It was a note, eh? Well, who wrote it, Della?"

"Tex Rowland."

Bill Smith jerked up on his reins so quickly that the half-broke horse reared and whirled off the road. In a moment he had it under control—and himself, too.

"Tex Rowland, eh?" grunted Slim, as Bill swung in beside him again. "Well, I'll be darned! Tucson brought you a note from him, eh? Tex didn't say where he was, did he, Della?"

"No, he didn't say, Slim. But he must be close to Antelope. If the sheriff gets hold of that note he will probably search. Tex said he had been hurt, but was getting along better now. But he is broke and needs money badly."

"Have yuh any idea who got the note?" asked Bill Smith.

"No. I don't know who found Tucson Charley this morning. Somebody brought him out here to the Paint Pot. He must have had the note in his pocket when he was killed, because he did not leave town after he came to see me."

"We'll see if we can find out a few things in town," said Slim. "If I can find out who got that note, I'll sure ride 'em ragged until they give me that note."

"Let me do some of the ridin', Slim," said Bill Smith. "I'm kinda interested in it, too."

Della shot a glance of gratitude to the stranger, who was willing to assist her, but he was looking straight ahead and did not see it. He was trying to puzzle out a reason for any one writing a note to her and signing his name.

Della went straight to the livery-stable, while Slim and Bill tied their horses at the Fashion hitch-rack and went into the saloon. Big Jim Mott was standing in front of a restaurant across the street and watched them ride into town. After Slim and Bill had gone into the saloon, Big Jim crossed the street and came in behind them.

It did not take Slim long to find out that Tucson Charley had been found at daylight by Pete Sutherland, the blacksmith, and old Ase Bradley. They had notified others, including the doctor, and Pete had driven the team that hauled Tucson's body out to the Paint Pot.

Slim and Bill had a drink and then went to the blacksmith shop, where they found Pete repairing a broken wagon-spring.

"—— road was rough," explained Pete wearily. "Broke a spring."

"Kinda bumpy ridin' for the corpse, wasn't it?" grinned Slim.

"Well, he didn't complain any," laughed Pete, wiping the perspiration off his brow and sitting on his anvil.

"You found him, didn't yuh?" queried Slim.

"Yeah—me and old Ase. He was almost under that pinto, and it's a wonder that the pinto didn't walk him into the ground."

"Yeah, it is, at that," agreed Slim. "But he wasn't cut up any. What do yuh do, when yuh find a dead man, Pete? Go through his pockets and all that?"

"Well, we didn't," grinned Pete. "Yuh see, we knowed Tucson so well that we didn't have to investigate him thataway."

"I suppose the doctor investigated," said Bill.

"Nothin' except to look him over and

tell us what we already knew. If Tucson carried any cree-den-shuls in his pockets, they're still in 'em—unless Pablo or his gang cleaned him out."

"They look like they might," laughed Bill.

They went back to their horses, no wiser than when they came to town. It was evident that no one had searched Tucson Charley, unless, as Pete had said, Pablo or his gang might have done it.

"Which they didn't," declared Slim. "Them three breeds ain't goin' to do a thing like that. They wouldn't touch him on a bet. If Tucson had a hundred dollars in his pants pocket, and Pablo knew it was there, it would be buried with the corpse."

They rode back to the XO-Bar-5, arriving there in time for supper. Crane was already eating his meal, while the half-breed, Alice Spotted Horse, shuffled back and forth from table to stove, attending to his wants.

"How'd the pow-wow come out?" asked Crane, as they sat down.

Alice had stopped and was looking at them. It was then that Slim realized what the news would mean to her. He looked at Bill Smith, who had also realized the same thing. Crane felt that something was not exactly right and waited for Slim to explain.

"This is goin' to be just too —— bad," said Slim softly. And then he spoke directly to Alice—

"Alice, I've got some bad news for yuh."

She blinked and stared at him. Perhaps she did not understand what he meant. He was always joking with her.

"Tucson Charley got killed last night, Alice."

She frowned slightly. Crane also scowled at Slim. He thought that Slim was joking, too; and it wasn't a good joke at all.

"Got kicked to death by a horse last night, Crane," said Bill Smith softly.

Alice lifted a hand and brushed a stringer of black hair out of her eyes. She was beginning to realize what Slim had said.

"Tucson Charley?" she asked thickly.

"Yeah, Alice. Horse kicked him last night. Too bad."

"Last night?" She was not looking at them now. Her eyes had closed tightly for a second, but now she was staring over their heads.

"Yeah, last night," said Slim.

"Horse kick Tucson Charley? He dead now?"

"Yeah, Alice," softly.

"I be ——!"

She barely breathed it. Her right hand came up to brush away the stringer of hair again, but stopped and fell back at her side.

"I be——!"

Then she turned around to the stove and picked up a skillet. The three men looked at each other and then looked away. Alice turned and looked at Bill Smith. In one hand she held the skillet and in the other an egg. She indicated the skillet and made a motion toward it with the egg. She wanted to know if he would like to have eggs for supper. Indians are not the stoics that some would like to believe; and anyway, Alice was half-breed. As Bill Smith watched her pantomime, a tear rolled down her cheek.

Quickly she turned away, but not before they had all seen the tears. Bill got to his feet and stepped away from the table.

"Aw, ——! I don't want any supper," he grunted.

"Me neither," said Slim softly.

Crane got up and the three of them filed outside. Bill glanced back into the kitchen. Alice Spotted Horse was standing at the stove, skillet and egg in her hands, staring into space.

"She didn't see us go out," said Bill Smith softly.

"No-o-o, I don't reckon she did," agreed Slim. "I seen that squashed aig runnin' out between her fingers, Bill. Death sure does raise —— with love thataway."

"And it's like a —— rattler; it don't care who it bites," said Crane sadly. "She'll go out into the hills pretty soon. The Injun blood is stronger than the white thataway. She'll wail all night, I betcha; but she'll go where we can't hear her."

"And about that time we'll swipe the coffee-pot and make us a feed in the bunk-house," opined Slim. "The Lord must 'a' handed me a soft spot for other folks' grief; but he also handed me a man-sized stummick. How about you, Smith?"

"Well, I don't want any eggs," replied Bill. "They'll always remind me of that Injun girl, tryin' to keep from cryin'. It took her quite a while to get it; but when she did, she sure got it all in a bunch."

"She's goin' out," whispered Crane. "I said she would, didn't I?"

ALICE SPOTTED HORSE came out the front door of the house, turned to the right and started off up a trail which led into the hills.

She had thrown a colored blanket around her shoulders and over her head, making her a blotch of color against the gray of the hill. Straight up the trail she went, never looking back. They watched her until the color of the blanket blended into the dim distance of the hills.

"It's just too danged bad, tha's all," said Slim, as they turned away. Neither of the others commented on it in any way.

"We saw Della Marsh today, Crane," continued Slim. "By ——, I feel like a dirty pup every time I see her. We didn't do anythin' wrong when we sent Tex Rowland to the pen; but right now I wish to gosh we hadn't 'a' done it."

"Yeah, I s'pose we might 'a' done different," agreed Crane. "But there was so danged much stealin' goin' on."

"Has it quit since he was sent up?" asked Bill Smith.

"Yeah, I think it has. Still, I dunno. I signed that petition to have Tex pardoned."

"I sure did," added Slim quickly.

"Was there a petition to have him pardoned?" queried Bill.

"Sure," nodded Crane. "Everybody in the country signed it. This Marsh girl rode all over the county gettin' signers. Every man on his jury signed it. By golly, a woman sure can work on the sympathy of a cowpuncher."

Bill Smith squinted painfully and busied himself with making a cigaret.

"I don't *sabe* why Tex made a getaway like he did," commented Slim. "It was almost a cinch he'd get out on parole, even if he didn't get pardoned. Della must a wrote him about it. If she didn't, I'll betcha old Rory McPherson did."

"Mebbe Tex didn't have no faith left," offered Crane. "It was a queer move for him to make, anyway, considerin' what his friends were doin' for him. If they catch him now, they sure won't pardon him very quick."

"Well, let's not dwell on any more grief tonight," said Slim, "I'll get that coffee-pot right now."

Slim and Crane went into the house, while Bill Smith went slowly down to the bunk-house. He knew now what old Hump Sherrill had meant when he spoke about a pardon. The old man had known that a movement was under way, but had had no chance to tell him.

And for some reason McHague, the warden, had stolen Tex Rowland's letters; letters from Della and possibly from Rory McPherson, telling him of what they were doing for him. And now some one was using his name in writing notes to Della Marsh.

"Kinda makes me wonder if I am Tex Rowland," he declared to himself. "I don't look a bit like him, that's a cinch. And I'll never be able to prove who I am. But I sure hope that I run across this jigger who signs Tex's name to letters. If he's Tex Rowland, I'll sure recognize him. And if he is, who in —— am I?"

He turned and stared off across the dim hills. Somewhere out there a half-breed woman was wailing out her grief over a lost sweetheart, and his sympathy went out to her.

"We're almost in the same fix, Alice," he said softly. "You've got a chance to wail yours out all to once; but I've got to stick around, like a danged ghost, and just look on, tha's all."

Slim was coming down from the kitchen, carrying a coffee-pot and some tin dishes that jangled softly. Bill Smith broke off his musings and went to meet him.

VI

"WHAT do ye expect me to say?" Old Rory McPherson squinted at Jack Lohman who was sitting on his horse in front of the RMP ranch-house, in Rainbow Valley. It was two days after the death of Tucson Charley. The old man held a soiled piece of paper in his hand, and the breeze shook his mop of red hair almost over his serious eyes.

"I didn't expect yuh to say anythin', Rory," replied the sheriff easily. "If you've got any opinion, I'd like to have it."

Old Rory looked down at the paper and shook his head.

"I ha' nothin' to say, Lohman. No doubt ye tell an honest tale, and the letter speaks for itself. Ye say ye know nothin' about who sent it to ye, lad?"

"Not a thing, Rory. It came in a plain envelope, as you can see."

"Aye, I can see that."

"Is that Della Marsh's writin', Rory?"

Old Rory squinted at the writing again: *"I love ye, Tex, in spite of ever-rythin'.* Aye, that is her writin', lad. Her name is there."

"Well, it's sure got me fightin' my head," admitted the sheriff. "It don't tell where Tex is, but it says that he's been hurt and needs money. Mebbe Miss Marsh knows where he is."

"Aye," nodded old Rory sadly, "she may know. Ye'll ask her?"

"I will not. If I can catch him myself, I'll do it, Rory; but I'll sneak up on no —— man behind a woman. Tex Rowland is probably in Rainbow Valley or out in the Antelope; which covers a lot of good hidin' places. It looks to me like somebody had found this note and sent it to me. It's a cinch that Miss Marsh didn't send it. Maybe Tex lost it himself, Rory. There's a lot of ways for it to have been lost; but it's a cinch that somebody sent it to me."

"Ye have the evidence of that," smiled old Rory. "I wish I knew where Tex is. It's har-rd luck to be sick and in need."

"Sure is," agreed Lohman, putting the letter back in his pocket. "I'll be driftin' along, Rory."

"Ye'll stay for a meal with us, won't ye?"

"No, I'd better be goin', I think."

"Ye know best," nodded Rory. "But the ranch is always open to ye, lad; and we'd like to have ye stay. Ye are not a Mott man."

Lohman laughed and shook his head:

"Not that anybody knows about, Rory. No, I don't think that Mr. Mott deals in county politics; he shoots higher than that."

"He may overshoot."

"It has been done, Rory. But Big Jim is pretty solid, I reckon. You sure jolted his pride the other day, and if I was you I'd sure keep one eye open. Big Jim won't forget it very soon."

"I hope he don't, lad," said Rory seriously. "There has long been bad blood between us. He wants Rainbow Valley, ye know. Well—" the old man sighed deeply—"he'll not get it as long as there's a McPherson here."

"It's worth havin'," agreed the sheriff warmly. "There's not a better range in the world than this valley. But what is this I hear about your niece goin' to work for Big Jim?"

The old man's eyes hardened as he nodded slowly. But there was more sorrow than anger in his face as he brushed the hair out of his eyes, and looked up at the sheriff.

"Aye, it's true, lad. She's gone over to the enemy. But she had nothin' again' the man, except that—well, after all, why should she share my hate? I'm gettin' old, so I am; and I want my own with me. She's all I've got, lad; and I haven't her—now."

The old man's voice broke wistfully. The sheriff reached out his hand to the old man.

"Well, so-long, Rory. Mebbe it ain't as bad as it looks. Do yuh want to send her any message?"

The old man shook his head slowly, thoughtfully, and started to walk away; but turned and smiled:

"Aye. Ye might tell her that Rosie O'Grady has five sons and two daughters.

"Rosie O'Grady?"

"The cat. It's her cat, lad. And she might like to know."

The sheriff grinned and rode away from the RMP. He liked the dour old Scot and would have stayed for dinner, but he was anxious to find out what he could about the note. He was not hunting for Tex Rowland. Of course, he was rather curious to know where Tex was hiding; but he was more curious to find out who had sent him the note that Tex had written to Della Marsh.

It was near the forks of the road, one of which led to the XO-Bar-5, that he met, or rather ran into, Slim Whelan and Bill Smith. They were riding toward town, but waited for him to join them.

"I always feel safer when I'm ridin' with the sheriff," grinned Slim.

"You do need protection," laughed the sheriff, as he rode up to them.

Slim introduced him to Bill Smith, and the three of them rode to Antelope together. The sheriff did not mention the note to them, because he knew that Slim had been instrumental in sending Tex to the penitentiary.

"You heard about Tucson Charley gettin' killed, didn't yuh?" asked Slim.

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah, it kinda surprized me, Slim."

"Why did it surprize yuh?"

"I didn't think a horse could kick hard enough to bust his head."

"Well, this one did," assured Slim.

"Where's Crane?" asked the sheriff.

"He's in town. Made a deal with Paint

Pablo for some cows, and I reckon he's fixin' up the deal at the bank."

They rode into town and left their horses at the hitch-rack.

THAT same morning Big Jim came to the bank and told Della that he had brought in a good saddle-horse for her to use. He lingered quite a while at her desk.

"I'm spending too much time around here," he laughed. "Since you came to work here I've neglected my ranch, don't you know it? Well, I have, Della. Before you came, I didn't show up around here once a week; now I'm here all the time."

Della passed it off with a laugh. She did not want Big Jim to make love to her, and she was almost sure that that was why he had given her a good position in the bank. Still he had never been offensive in any way.

He went over to the cashier's desk and engaged him in conversation for several minutes, before motioning Della to come over to them.

"Get me twenty-five hundred dollars in fairly big bills," he told her.

She went into the vault and came back with the required amount, which Big Jim counted carefully. He asked the cashier for a long envelope, which he secured for Big Jim. Putting the bills into the envelope, Big Jim handed it to Della.

"Martin Crane will be in this morning and you are to give this twenty-five hundred to him. He will probably have Pablo with him. It is money to be paid on a cattle deal."

Della nodded and carried the envelope back to her desk. Big Jim left a few minutes later, and in about an hour Martin Crane came in. He was alone.

"Mott leave somethin' here for me?" he asked.

Della handed him the envelope, which he stuffed into his pocket.

"Don't you want to count it?" she asked.

He jerked it out of his pocket, glanced at the mass of bills inside and shoved it back.

"'T'sall right," he grunted. "I've got to rope that danged Pablo before he changes his mind ag'in."

He fairly ran out of the bank and headed up the street. Della smiled and went back to her work. In about fifteen minutes Crane came back into the bank.

"Where's Big Jim?" he demanded.

"He went out about an hour before you came in this morning," replied Della. "He didn't say where he was going."

"By ——, he's some business man!" snorted Crane angrily. "Here I almost had to hog-tie that danged Pablo to get him to town to sell me them white-faced cows. I told Jim Mott what I wanted, dang his soul! Now the deal is all off."

"I'm sure we know nothing about it, Mr. Crane," smiled Della. "He gave me that money to give to you."

"Well, you can have it back, young lady!"

Crane flipped the long envelope back to her. She opened it and counted the money, looking up at him in astonishment.

"Why, there's only fifteen hundred dollars here!" she exclaimed.

"Y' danged right that's all there is! I told Big Jim that I had to have twenty-five hundred."

"But—but—" faltered Della.

The cashier crossed over to her and counted the money. It totalled exactly fifteen hundred.

"That's queer," muttered the cashier.

"What's queer?" demanded Crane.

The cashier straightened up, his thin lips compressed tightly—

"I saw Mr. Mott put twenty-five hundred dollars into that envelope, Crane."

Crane leaned across the counter, his brow furrowed questioningly.

"You mean to say that there was twenty-five hundred in that envelope when I got it?"

"I—I don't know what to say. Mr. Mott had Miss Marsh get the money from the vault, and we both know that he put it into the envelope—didn't he, Miss Marsh?"

Della did not reply.

"Well, it sure as —— wasn't there when I tried to pay it to Pablo," declared Crane. "And that whole deal is spoiled. He's got the idea now that I was tryin' to cheat him. I said—

"'Here's your twenty-five hundred dollars, Pablo.'

"I handed him the whole works. And any old time yuh think that half-breed can't count, yo're all wrong. He counted it as quick as I could, and then he says:

"'You pretty —— smart, eh? Cheat Injun, eh? You go to ——!'

"And that's what I know about it."

"But I tell you, it was in there——"

Della stopped. Big Jim was coming into

the bank. He nodded to Crane, but stopped and looked at them. It was evident at a glance that something was all wrong.

"Did you finish that deal with Pablo, Crane?" he asked.

"You know danged well I didn't," growled Crane.

"I do? Where did you get that idea?"

"I told you I wanted twenty-five hundred dollars, Mott."

"Well, that's what you got."

"I did not! I got fifteen hundred, tha's-all."

Big Jim looked curiously at Della and the cashier, rubbing his chin with the ball of his right thumb.

"I—I gave him that envelope, Mr. Mott," said Della.

"I got the envelope," nodded Crane.

"Didn't you count the money?" asked Big Jim.

"No, I didn't have time. You know Pablo. I argued him into the deal and he wanted the money right then. I told him I had to go to the bank after it, and he started after his horse; so I ran down here after the money. ——, I didn't take time to count it."

"And the envelope only contained fifteen hundred, eh?" Thus Big Jim thoughtfully. "There was twenty-five hundred in —oh, well, the deal is off, anyway. Maybe we can have another talk with Pablo."

Big Jim turned away and went into his private office. Crane squinted after him and walked out of the bank, leaving Della and the cashier looking at each other. Then the cashier turned away and went back to his desk.

There had been no accusations, but Della knew that everything pointed to the fact that she had taken the money. Was it all in the envelope when Crane got it from her she wondered? Or did Crane take it out on his way to meet Pablo?

The cashier spoke her name and she turned to see Big Jim in the doorway of his office, motioning for her to come. She went to him and he closed the door behind them. She was not afraid.

He motioned her to a chair and sat down on the edge of his flat-top desk.

"That's a queer deal, Della," he said softly.

"Do you think I took it?" she demanded.

"Don't talk that way," he parried. "I'm not accusing any one. Crane could have taken the money."

"But you don't believe he did."

Della got to her feet and faced him hotly.

"Sit down, please," he begged. "There is no use getting mad about it, Della."

"You think I'm a thief."

The tears came to her eyes. She wanted to cry, but was too angry.

"You are accusing yourself, little lady. Now, sit down and be patient. It's only a thousand dollars, anyway; and it won't break me." He laughed softly. "I've got a good many of them. Whoever got that money is welcome to it, do you understand? I will see that no one knows it, except those who already know."

"Is that fair to me?" she demanded.

Big Jim smiled and snipped the end off a cigar with his strong teeth.

"Della," he said slowly, "I'm not going to investigate. It would only start a scandal, and I'd rather lose a thousand than to start trouble. Whoever got that money needs it more than I do."

"Needs it?" she repeated.

"People hardly ever take what they do not need, Della."

The one sentence in Tex Rowland's note —*I need about five hundred dollars*—flashed through her mind, and she looked up quickly to find him looking at her closely, as if reading her mind.

"Maybe Crane needed it," he said softly.

It was as if he suspected her, but was willing to give her a slight doubt. Her face paled and she drew away from him.

"You mean that I did—and Mr. Crane might have?" she queried.

"Oh, pshaw!"

Big Jim threw away his cigar and came toward her.

"Listen to me, Della: We'll both forget this. As far as I'm concerned, it's a closed incident. I'd be willing to give you many times that amount, if you would ask me for it. I like you better than any girl I've ever known."

"And still you believe I stole from you."

"That's all past and gone, Della."

"It is not past and gone, Mr. Mott. This is not something you can wipe out with a few words."

"Well," he laughed, a half-sneer on his face, "what would you have me do? Accuse you of theft? Drag your name in the dirt? Don't be a fool, Della. If you've got any sense left, you'll let me bury this whole thing. You know that I care a lot for you, little lady."

"But am I a thief?" she demanded hotly. "There has been no investigation."

"Do you want one?" Big Jim's voice hardened slightly.

"I demand one."

He considered her seriously for several moments and shrugged his shoulders.

"There must be some Scotch blood in you, Della."

"Yes—the McPherson blood, Mr. Mott."

Big Jim laughed savagely and his right hand went unconsciously to his ear. He could still feel the sting of old Rory's blow.

"McPherson blood, eh? That hard-headed old ——!" He laughed and shook his head. "He won't welcome an investigation."

"He has nothing to do with it," reminded Della coldly.

"No? And you his only living relative?"

"This is my battle—not his."

Big Jim drew out a fresh cigar and lighted it. Della moved back to the door and reached for the knob.

"Wait a minute," said Big Jim. "I want you to be sure that you want this to go on, Della. I suppose you know what it means. It will be bad for you, no matter which way it goes. The theft lies between you and Martin Crane. One of you must have taken that money, don't you see?

"It would be almost impossible to convict a girl like you in this country. But, even if you were cleared of the charge, there would always be a doubt, unless the money was recovered. Can you afford to take that chance?"

"You haven't given me a chance," she said bitterly. "You let Mr. Crane go where he would. If he took the money, he has had plenty of chance to dispose of it by this time. Was that fair?"

"Possibly not, Della. But I thought you would listen to reason. I don't want to lose you. I gave you this position, in order to see you once in a while. You don't need to work. Just say the word and I'll see that you never have to work for anybody again."

She faced him squarely, her back against the door. There was nothing timid about her now.

"Do you mean that you want to marry me?" she asked.

He smiled at her and shifted the cigar between his lips.

"I'd sure take you a long ways away from here," he said, ignoring her direct question. "I could dress you in silks, furs and diamonds, little lady. I'd show you the bright lights and give you everything that goes with them. You'd soon forget the cattle-country."

"Because you love me?" she asked coldly.

Something in her voice caused him to hesitate; something that made him know that she detested him thoroughly. Her head was held high and her eyes surveyed him coldly.

"And you would do this because you love me?" she repeated.

He leaned toward her, his teeth clenched tightly on his cigar, his eyes narrowed. Then he struck the top of the desk with his clenched hand.

"No, by ——!" he gritted. "But I'd do it to break the heart of that sniffling old uncle of yours. I told him I'd break him, if it was the last thing I'd ever do. I'd be good to you, just to show him that I mean what I say. Now you can take your choice."

His lips were white with anger, but they were no whiter than her cheeks as she turned and walked out without a reply, leaving him staring after her, the drool from his cigar running down over his trembling chin.

SHE went out through the front door and up the sidewalk, just as the sheriff, Slim Whelan and Bill Smith were tying their horses at the Fashion hitch-rack. She did not see them. In fact, she was incapable of seeing anything, and almost ran into them.

"Whoa, Blaze!" exclaimed Slim softly, putting out a hand to steady her.

She looked up quickly, dazedly.

"I—I beg your pardon," she said huskily and half-staggered past them.

The three men turned and watched her.

"Now, what do yuh know about that?" wondered Slim aloud. "She's as white as a sheet and she's got both fists shut tight."

"Acts like she's walkin' in her sleep," said the sheriff. "Mebbe she's sick."

Bill Smith turned as if to follow her, but remembered that he was not to do such things. There was no doubt that Della was suffering, and he wanted to help her. Crane was coming out of the saloon, and noticed that the three men were looking at Della. He, too, watched her cross the main street, and then came over to the three men.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked.

"That's what we're wonderin'," said Slim. "She acts like she's sick. Danged near ran into us, didn't she, Bill? Kinda like she had blind-staggers, don'tcha know it?"

Della had disappeared down the little side street; so they all turned back to the saloon door.

"Didja fix up that deal with Pablo?" asked Slim.

Crane shook his head. Big Jim was coming up the street toward them and they waited for him. He nodded curtly to them and spoke directly to the sheriff—

"Lohman, I want to have a word with you."

"All right," nodded the sheriff, and they walked back toward the bank together, while the other three men went into the saloon.

"I wonder what Big Jim wanted of the sheriff," said Slim, as they filled their glasses.

Crane drank thoughtfully and motioned for them to have another. It was not like Martin Crane to drink raw whisky. They noticed that he was filling his glass to the brim. Three big drinks of it went down his gullet before he turned his back on the bar.

His lips twisted in a grim smile as he hitched his holster around, and rubbed the palm of his right hand on his hip. Slim and Bill exchanged glances. They knew that Crane had shocked his system with strong liquor for a reason.

"I've got a hunch what Big Jim wanted him for," he said slowly, his eyes hardening with anger. "And I'm all set, y'betcha."

"Let's have another drink, gents," suggested the bartender.

"I've got a-plenty," replied Crane evenly. "You fellers go ahead."

They turned back to the bar, but took cigars this time.

"We're with yuh, Crane," said Bill Smith softly. "I dunno what it's all about—but count us in."

It was several minutes later when the sheriff came into the saloon. He stopped in the doorway and looked at the three men at the bar. Crane was slightly hunched, immovable. The sheriff gave a slight shake of his head and came up to the bar beside Slim.

"I'll buy a drink," he said slowly, nodding to the bartender. "I reckon I need one now."

Crane relaxed slightly and accepted a cigar. The sheriff was very thoughtful as he drank his liquor. Crane watched him closely, standing slightly apart from the rest. Then the sheriff indicated the door, with a slight jerk of his head, and they followed him outside.

"Crane," he said, as they groped near the hitch-rack, "what do you know about that money deal this mornin'?"

Crane swore softly, as he outlined what had happened.

"You didn't count the money at the time yuh got it, eh?"

"No."

"Big Jim and the girl had quite a run-in, I reckon," stated the sheriff. "He's sure she got the money. But he didn't search her; just let her walk out. Now he wants me to arrest her for stealing his thousand dollars."

Bill Smith said nothing, but he turned away, staring back toward the bank, fighting against an impulse to go there and kill Big Jim Mott.

"No wonder she looked sick," said Slim sadly.

"Why don't he have me arrested?" asked Crane. "I could 'a' taken that money—— him and his money! I've got a notion to go down there and heave a gun into his teeth. Why would that girl steal money from him?"

Slim and Bill Smith glanced quickly at each other. Both of them knew about that fraudulent note and of Tex's request for money.

Lohman's eye had been quick enough to read the unspoken question between them. In his pocket was a mighty good reason for Della to take the money. It would go a long ways toward convincing the jury of her guilt, in case it was produced in court. He felt sure that Slim and Bill knew something about that note, but he did not want to question them.

"I wouldn't start trouble with Mott over it," advised the sheriff. "He's naturally sore over losing the money, and I guess he and that girl had a row; which didn't help matters none. Where does she live?"

None of them knew; so they went to the

post-office and the sheriff inquired. Crane went back to the saloon, but Slim and Bill went down to the dressmaker's home with the sheriff. Della was not there, but there was a note pinned to the front door. It read:

Miss Freeland:
I have gone back to Rainbow Valley.

It was just signed with an initial "D."

"Well, I'm —— glad of that," sighed the sheriff, as they went back to the main street, and the sheriff led them to the livery-stable. The stable-man nodded, when the sheriff questioned him, and said:

"Yeah, she went away a little while ago. Big Jim brought a horse here for her to use, but she took one of our horses instead. No, she didn't say where she was goin'."

They went back up the street, and Big Jim accosted them as they passed the bank.

"She's gone back to Rainbow Valley," said the sheriff, in answer to Big Jim's question. "Hired a livery-horse."

Bill Smith had stopped close to Big Jim, who scowled at the sheriff's statement.

"Did, eh?" he grunted sourly. "Gone back to Rainbow. Well, you can find her there, can't you, Lohman?"

"Yeah, I can."

The sheriff did not enthuse over the prospect.

"All right—go and get her."

"Yuh aim to put her in jail?" queried Bill Smith softly.

Big Jim squinted at him, his lips curling with sarcasm:

"What in —— did you think I was going to do? She's a thief and——"

Right at that point Big Jim's sentence ended, when Bill Smith's right fist, traveling in a wide arc, caught him midway between the point of his chin and the hinge of his jaw. It was all done in a second. Big Jim's mouth was still set for the next word of his sentence when he hit the sidewalk.

The sheriff and Slim stepped back a few steps, staring at the prostrate Big Jim Mott and at Bill Smith. Big Jim did not move; neither did Bill Smith, who had stepped back, slightly crouched, waiting for Big Jim to recover.

"One's enough," whispered Slim foolishly. "My ——, what a punch!"

The sheriff looked curiously at Bill Smith, and wondered just why this handsome cowpuncher had smashed Big Jim for calling the girl a thief. It was unlooked for in a stranger. Several other men were hurrying down toward them, and among the crowd was Martin Crane, a trifle unsteady of legs. They moved in close and watched Big Jim get to his feet unassisted.

He was so badly dazed that he did not seem to realize what had happened. As he straightened up to his full height, Bill Smith shot forward, starting another punch at the big man's jaw; but Slim blocked him.

"Hol' fast, Bill," he grunted. "He's licked."

"Let 'im go to it," gurgled Crane. "I dunno whazzit's all about—but let 'im go to it, Slimmie."

Big Jim felt of his jaw and stepped back against the doorway. Things were clearing for him now and he realized that Bill Smith had knocked him down. He looked curiously at Bill Smith, trying to figure out why Bill Smith had hit him.

The blow had sapped his strength badly, and he wanted to sit down. Every one seemed to be waiting for Bill Smith or Big Jim to speak. Then Bill Smith glanced at the crowd around him and spoke directly to Big Jim.

"I'll tell yuh why I hit yuh, Mott. Tex Rowland is my best friend—and the girl you accuse of stealin' from yuh is the girl he loves. You let her alone or Tex Rowland will kill yuh. Now that ain't no threat—it's a promise."

Bill Smith turned and walked on up the street. Big Jim blinked painfully, turned around and went into the bank without saying a word to any one. The crowd watched him disappear inside and then went back up the street.

Slim, Martin Crane and the sheriff walked along together and joined Bill Smith in the Fashion saloon. The sheriff held out his hand to Bill Smith, a grin on his lips, as he said:

"Bill Smith, I'm the sheriff of this county and I hadn't ought to act like this; but I'd like to shake hands with yuh. I wish I had a friend that would do a thing like that for me, if I was in Tex Rowland's place. I hope Tex appreciates it."

"Yeah, I reckon he does," smiled Bill, as they shook hands.

They had a round of drinks, after which Slim persuaded Crane that they should go back to the ranch. Crane was pretty drunk, but he acquiesced. Big Jim watched them ride out of town, squinting one eye speculatively, as if trying to make a decision.

Then he left the bank and walked down to the depot, which was about three blocks away. He asked the sleepy-eyed operator for a telegram blank, on which he wrote:

Warden, Elk Lodge Penitentiary.
Indications point to fact that Tex Rowland is hiding in this vicinity. Might be worth investigating.
(Signed) Jim Mott.

"Send this right away, will you?" he asked the operator.

"Y'betcha," nodded the operator, turning to his instrument.

Big Jim walked outside, ripped a match savagely along the side of the depot and lighted his cigar.

"Friend of Tex Rowland, eh? Well, maybe you'll be bait for us to find your dear friend. And next time I'll be looking for you, Bill Smith."

He strode along a few steps, puffing savagely, and an idea seemed to strike him.

"It's a ten-to-one shot that Tex is in Rainbow Valley," he declared to himself. "Old Rory would protect him. I'd like to see that old ——'s face, when Della tells him she's a thief."

It seemed to amuse him so much that he went back into the bank, his face wreathed with smiles. The cashier glanced at Big Jim as he disappeared into his private office.

"Lost a thousand dollars and got knocked down," mused the cashier, "and acts happy over it all. Sure takes all kinds of folks to make up a world."

VII

THE following day Crane realized that he had made a sort of a fool out of himself, and that Big Jim might fire him. So he decided to go to Antelope at once and make his peace with the man who was paying him to run the XO-Bar-5.

Slim decided to go, too. He asked Bill Smith if he wanted to ride down with them, but Bill declined. As soon as they rode away, Bill saddled his horse and rode toward Rainbow Valley. He was curious to know what old Rory McPherson thought about Big Jim's accusations, and he also wanted to see Della.

The RMP ranch had been home to Bill Smith. He knew every clump of trees, every twisting of the stream in Rainbow Valley. Yet he was a stranger in the place. He rode in past the big barns and up to the old ranch-house, sprawled under the shade of some giant sycamores which had been planted there when the first McPherson came to Rainbow.

A huge figure of a dog, half-mastiff, half-Dane, uncoiled itself from a spot near the kitchen door and came toward him, it's head lowered, a deep rumble in its throat. Bill Smith grinned and swung out of his saddle.

"Pancho," he said softly, "Pancho, do you know me?"

The great dog stopped and looked at him. Its eyes were a steel-blue in color, heavily-pouched. Its nostrils worked violently, as it caught the scent of a man it had known so well. Then, with a little rumble of delight, it came straight to Bill Smith, fawning upon him with its great paws, trying to lick his hands.

"You knew me, Pancho," whispered Bill Smith. "You knew old Tex."

He looked up quickly. On the porch stood old Rory McPherson and Della, a look of astonishment on their faces.

"Why, it's Mr. Smith!" exclaimed Della.

"And a ver-r-y rare young man," added old Rory. "Old Pancho does not take to str-r-rangers, sir."

"I can't quite understand Pancho," said Della. "Look at him, Uncle Rory."

The big dog continued to manifest the greatest of joy. He had been used to romping with Tex Rowland every day, and this scent brought back joy memories to him. Faces meant nothing to him; but a voice and a scent did.

"Aye, lass; and it's uncanny," replied old Rory, coming down the steps to meet Bill Smith.

He held out his hand and did not wait for an introduction.

"I'd take the dog's wor-r-rd for ye, sir," said the old man, as they shook hands. "Ye can't fool dogs and children. We grow up and lose that intuition. Will ye not come and sit on the por-rch? Della?"

He turned his head and looked back, but Della had slipped into the house.

"Anyway," he said, turning back, "ye'll sit with me, eh?"

Bill Smith accepted a seat on the porch and rolled a cigaret.

"Ye are a str-r-ranger, are ye not?" asked the old man, "I have never seen ye before."

Bill Smith nodded.

"Yeah, I reckon I am, Mr. McPherson. I work for the XO-Bar-5."

"Ye do, eh?"

The old man was on the defensive at once.

"Ye work for Jim Mott, do ye?"

"I did," smiled Bill, as he examined his knuckles.

Luckily the blow had landed square, leaving only a slight soreness.

"And do ye not now, Mr. Smith?"

"I don't know. I belted Big Jim in the jaw yesterday, and he was too tired to fire me at that time. Crane went to Antelope today, and Big Jim will probably send my time out to me by him."

"Ye str-r-ruck him, ye mean?" demanded the old man eagerly. "Ye did? And ye brought him down?"

Bill Smith nodded slowly.

"Wonders will never cease," said the old man softly. "Ye—" he squinted at Bill Smith closely—"ye are a chunk of a lad. Ye have the arms and chest of a man I know, and I've no doubt that ye jarred Mr. Mott. And did ye have a r-r-reason for comin' here, or did ye just dr-r-rop in?"

"I came to see Miss Marsh."

The old man regarded him steadily, glanced back toward the door and moved in closer to Bill Smith.

"Do ye know what happened yesterday in Antelope?"

"Yeah. I was there and I sure heard about it."

"Tell me about it, will ye?"

"I'll tell yuh what I know about it, Mr. McPherson."

And in as few words as possible Bill Smith told the old man all he knew about the missing money and the accusation against Della. The old man's bony hands gripped the arms of his chair, and his face grew white with wrath before Smith had finished his tale.

"Ye ar-re tellin' me true, lad?" he panted. "This is not a fair-r-ry tale ye tell me?"

"Say, didn't yuh know about this?" demanded Smith, "didn't she——"

"——, no! I knew there was somethin' wr-r-rong, but—oh, the poor lass!"

The old man got unsteadily to his feet, panting with combined wrath and pity. As he turned toward the door, Della came out and up to him. She had been crying. He put his hands on her shoulders and they stared into each other's faces.

"I heard him tell you," she said firmly. "I wanted to tell you, Uncle Rory; but I—I just couldn't. It's a lie—all a lie. I never took the money."

The old man laughed fiercely, gripping her shoulders until she winced from the pain.

"A lie!" he fairly shouted. "Of course it's a lie!"

He whirled on Bill Smith, fairly shaking his bony fist under the cowpuncher's nose.

"Do ye think it's true? Do ye think——"

"If I did," said Smith calmly, "I wouldn't 'a' smashed him in the jaw yesterday."

"Oh, aye."

He gripped a porch-post fiercely and looked down the valley, his old eyes bloodshot with emotion.

"And he told the sher-r-riff to arrest her, did he?"

"Yeah. But she pulled out ahead of 'em."

Old Rory turned and stared at Della. His face softened and he put a hand on her shoulder.

"They'd put ye in jail, lass? He'd drag your name in the dirt, would he?"

He turned suddenly and stared at Bill Smith.

"And what inter-r-rest have ye in this, sir?" he demanded.

"Tex Rowland was my best friend."

Old Rory moved a pace or two nearer to Bill Smith, looking at him closely. Della was staring at him, wide-eyed, too.

"Ye were Tex Rowland's friend?"

"We were closer than twin brothers," said Bill Smith.

"Aye, is that so? Years ago, per-r-rhaps?"

"No—just a while ago."

"But Tex lived here for years and you—" the old man hesitated and lowered his voice—"you wasn't in—in there with him?"

Bill Smith nodded slowly.

"Oh, yes!"

Old Rory straightened up with a sigh.

"Do you know where he is now?" asked Della, almost whispering the question.

"Yeah, I know where he is but I can't tell yuh now. Tex is hidin' out where they won't find him. He don't need money, Miss Marsh."

"And he's alive?"

"Y'betcha."

"Thank God for that."

She smiled through her tears. It was worth a lot for her to know that Tex was safe and that he did not want for money. She was willing to bide her time now.

"I'll go to Antelope tomorrow," said the old man slowly, thoughtfully, "and I'll kill Big Jim Mott."

"That wouldn't do no good," said Bill Smith quickly. "They'd hang you, tha's-all. And your hangin' wouldn't clear up that stolen thousand dollars, don'tcha see?"

"Why, Uncle Rory, you mustn't talk like that," said Della. "He told me that he wanted to break your heart."

"He told you that, lass?"

"Yes. It was after I demanded an investigation. He got mad and said things that he didn't intend to."

"He didn't want to investigate?" asked Bill Smith.

"No. He wanted to forget it all, he said."

Bill Smith was rolling a cigaret and now he lifted his head and looked straight at her.

"Wanted to forget it, eh? And what was the price?"

Della stared at him for a moment, but her cheeks flushed crimson and she turned away, going quickly into the house. Bill and the old man looked at each other for several moments. Old Rory was not quick to comprehend such things, but he gradually digested it. Then he struck the porch-post with the side of his clenched hand and swore bitterly.

"He'd try to buy her for a thousand dollars," he said hoarsely. "That price for a McPherson! By ——, I'll show him what the pr-r-rice will be."

"And if the sheriff comes to arrest her—don't quarrel with him," advised Bill Smith. "He's all right. It's a bailable offense, and yuh can see that she don't stay in jail."

"Aye, that's good advice, lad; and I thank ye for it."

Bill Smith got to his feet and held out his hand.

"I reckon I'll be siftin' along, old timer," he grinned. "I've enjoyed the visit with yuh. You tell the little lady good-by for me, will yuh?"

"But won't ye stay, lad? There's room for ye."

"There's Tex Rowland to look after," whispered Bill Smith.

"Oh, aye. Then be on your way, and God bless ye. Come soon."

Bill Smith swung on to his horse, and rode slowly down the old highway toward Antelope with a determined smile on his lips. Pancho, the big, blue dog, followed him to the corner of the fence and watched him disappear around a bend in the road, while old Rory leaned against the post and looked moodily out across the Rainbow hills.

"Bill Smith," he muttered softly. "Now, who in the —— are ye, lad? Ye have a fine face, and even old Pancho—now that beats anythin' I've ever seen. He hates strangers, but he almost wore out his paws on Bill Smith. There's queer things in the wor-rld."

Della had come back to the doorway and was looking down the valley. Old Rory turned and looked at her.

"He's gone. Pancho followed him to the cor-r-rner, lass."

"Then he must be all right," she said simply.

CONTRARY to Bill Smith's expectations, Big Jim Mott did not tell Crane to fire him. Not that Bill Smith cared in the least, except that he liked both Crane and Slim Whelan, and his job on the XO-Bar-5 kept him at a point about midway of the warring factions.

It was two uneventful days after Bill Smith's visit to Rory McPherson's ranch in Rainbow Valley, that he and Slim rode to Antelope town. There had been no work to do at the XO-Bar-5, and they were both tired of inaction.

Big Jim Mott rode into town half an hour after their arrival and met them in the Fashion Bar. Bill half-expected that Big Jim would try to even matters with him on sight, and was not prepared for Big Jim's hearty invitation to have a drink.

"How are things at the ranch?" he asked, as they filled their glasses.

"Kinda slow," admitted Slim. "We just kinda foller each other around, hopin' that somebody will discover somethin' to do."

Big Jim laughed and tossed off his drink. He was in rare good humor and seemed to hold no grudge against Bill Smith for the knock-down; but Bill Smith did not relax his caution. Finally Big Jim turned to him—

"Smith, I've got a better job for you, if you care to take it."

"Tha'sso?"

Bill slid his empty glass down the bar.

"Hundred a month," stated Big Jim.

"Yeah?" Bill Smith was interested. The XO-Bar-5 was paying him forty dollars per month, and this added sixty dollars was worth considering.

"Taking charge of the Lightning ranch," he said slowly. "I'll give you two punchers to help you run the place. It will take quite a lot of work to put the house in shape, I suppose."

"Uh-huh," nodded Bill, "I reckon it will."

"The Lightnin'?" queried Slim wonderingly. "The Paint Pot?"

Big Jim smiled and turned back to the bar, motioning to the bartender to fill the glasses.

"Yes, I bought Pablo out yesterday," he stated. "He had some stock I wanted, but he was too hard to do business with; so I made him a good offer for the whole works and he sold out."

"Well, I'll be darned!" grunted Slim. "I'll betcha yuh had to show him all the money in one pile, didn't yuh?"

"Something like that, Slim."

"When do yuh take charge?" asked Bill.

"Took it over yesterday. There's nobody running the place yet, but it's ready for you to start in on right away."

Bill Smith considered the proposition. He did not trust Big Jim. He had knocked Big Jim down publicly, and Big Jim was not the kind of a man to forget it. Still he was not in a position to refuse the offer; so he nodded slowly.

"I'll take yuh up on that," he agreed. "I've always wanted to run a ranch. Do I pick my own punchers?"

"I suppose so. Mike John and Mose Dickey are still out there. They're good punchers, but rather shy on brains. You might keep them until you find better ones. Might be a good scheme to go out there and look the place over, Smith. It'll need a lot of fixing. When you find out what you need, come down to the bank and draw money enough to cover it."

"All right," grinned Bill. "I never had a bank to draw on; so yuh better warn the cashier to look out for me."

Slim and Bill stood for a long time at the bar after Big Jim had gone away. Slim was wondering why Big Jim had given the foremanship of the Lightening to Bill Smith instead of to him; and Bill Smith was doing quite a bit of wondering himself.

"Mebbe he wants to keep track of me," mused Bill to himself. "It ain't 'cause he loves me, that's a cinch."

Finally Slim grinned and held out his hand.

"I'm plumb glad yuh got the job, Bill," he said sincerely. "I was wonderin' why he didn't give it to me, especially after yuh batted him in the jaw the other day; but that's his business. Let's have another drink."

"I'm wonderin', too, Slim," smiled Bill, accepting the invitation. "I reckon he's stuck on my shape. He don't know whether I'm capable of runnin' the place, nor whether I'm honest nor anythin'."

Slim laughed and wiped his lips with the back of his hand:

"I'll play yuh a game of pool, Bill. I ain't played since last year, but I used to be a dinger."

They walked over to the pool table and were chalking their cues when a man came into the saloon, with two dogs on leash. The man was well dressed and evidently more than half-intoxicated.

"What kind of danged dogs are them?" queried Slim, pointing at them with his cue. "Ain't fox-hounds, are they, Bill?"

"Bloodhounds," said the man proudly, but thickly, as he tried to untangle the leash from his knees.

"Best pair of trailers in the worl', tha's what they are."

"You ain't lost nothin', have yuh?" asked Slim seriously.

"Huh?"

"I said we might have a hard Winter," replied Slim loudly.

"What the —— do I care about Winter? Let's have a drink."

Slim and Bill placed their cues on the table and walked back to the bar. Bill stooped down and petted one of the dogs on its head. They both fawned around him until yanked away by their keeper.

"Don't monkey with 'em," he grunted. "They're worth lots of money, don'tcha know it?"

"Pettin' 'em takes away their value, eh?" asked Bill.

The man was too occupied with his drink to answer.

"How long yuh been here?" asked Slim.

"Come in thish mornin'."

The man twisted his face from the bite of the whisky and leaned both elbows on the bar.

"Dogs drag yuh in?" queried Bill.

"Dogs drag—shay, whatcha talkin' 'bout, hey?"

"Dogs—not hay. Let's have another."

"Aw ri'. Thish is re'l nice town around here. I like it."

"You can have it," replied Slim seriously.

"I'll take it, frien'. Mush obliged."

"Oh, don't mention it. We'll give it to him, won't we, Bill?"

"Give him the whole county, Slim," grinned Bill. "Don't be a piker."

"All right, the whole county it is. You'll take it, won't yuh, Mister Blood Hound?"

"Yesshir. M' name's Alfred Henderson Failing."

"You've got quite a family tree," observed Bill, but his meaning was lost upon the man with the bloodhounds.

A man came in through the doorway and halted near the bar. Bill Smith turned his head and looked square into the face of McHague, head warden of the Elk Lodge penitentiary. Their glances held for a moment, but there was no recognition in the eyes of the warden.

He was wearing a gray-checked suit, black derby hat and a pair of glaring, yellow shoes, which creaked with every movement of his beefy body. The butt of a badly-chewed cigar was clenched between his teeth, a trickle of its juice making a brown streak down his slightly stubbled chin.

Bill Smith felt a thrill down his spine as he squinted at McHague; but the big warden knew him not.

"What the —— are you doin' here with them dogs?" snarled McHague at Alfred Henderson Failing, who was trying to brace himself and try to look dignified.

He swallowed with difficulty and squinted down at the two hounds, as if trying to figure out a reasonable explanation.

"You're drunk!" snorted McHague angrily. "Now you get to —— back to the hotel with them dogs, you drunken bum!"

"Yesshir."

Failing tried to appear at ease and untangle the dogs at the same time. He even essayed a whistling solo, much to the disgust of McHague. After much effort he managed to straighten out both leashes and went out through the front door, half-falling from the pull of the two hounds.

McHague watched him go and then turned to those at the bar.

"Have a drink, gents?" he asked.

Slim and Bill leaned against the bar, watching McHague unroll some bills.

"Val'able dogs?" asked Slim.

"Couldn't buy 'em for a thousand apiece," grunted McHague.

"My ——!" exploded Slim, "I've got to look at 'em agin'. Was they set with diamonds?"

"Good rabbit-dogs come high," offered Bill Smith seriously.

McHague tossed a bill onto the bar and spat out his cigar, as if disgusted with their ignorance.

"What the —— are you talkin' about?" he grunted. "Them ain't rabbit-dogs."

"Ex-cuse us," said Slim quickly, "we're ignorant enough to ask yuh what they are, mister."

"They're the best pair of bloodhounds in the West. They never lose a scent."

"Bloodhounds?" queried Bill. "Man trailers?"

"You betcha. Finest bred dogs in the world. They belong to me."

"You kinda hate them dogs, don'tcha?" grinned Bill. "They don't look like much, except that they're sad in the face."

"You'd be sad, if they were on your trail," replied McHague.

"I s'pose so. Say, your face is familiar, somehow. Seems like I've knowed you some place."

McHague tossed off his drink and grinned widely.

"Maybe you have. I'm the head warden at Elk Lodge."

Slim choked on his drink and it was some time before conversation was renewed.

"You say that them dogs never lose a scent?" queried Bill.

"That's what I said," replied McHague proudly.

"Uh-huh. Then they're the ones yuh used when yuh caught Tex Rowland, ain't they?"

McHague flushed angrily.

"What do you know about Tex Rowland?"

"He's my best friend," said Bill Smith softly.

"The —— he is?"

McHague's hands clenched and his

brows drew down slightly over his eyes.

"Your best friend, eh?"

Bill Smith nodded slowly and moved a trifle away from the bar.

"Yeah, that's what I said, McHague."

"You seem to know my name."

"I know more than that about yuh."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Tex told me a few things, McHague. He told me about yuh stealin' his letters, and how yuh bragged to him about it. Yüh had him where he couldn't get away, didn't yuh? He didn't have a Chinaman's chance to do anythin'. Yuh framed to kill him, too. Yuh tried to force him to start trouble, so your hired murderer could shoot him down. But he double-crossed yuh, McHague—him and the old trusty."

McHague's scowl almost concealed his eyes before Bill Smith had finished his accusation. His lips were shut in a thin, white line, below which jutted his undershot jaw like the prow of a fighting ship.

"Where in —— did you get all that?" he gritted.

"From Tex Rowland. And by ——, he told the truth!"

"He lied!" snorted McHague.

"He did not! You forced him into a fight, McHague—and he whipped you in your own office, you dirty coyote!"

Bill Smith had not intended going so far with the accusation, but his soul was still bitter against McHague and he forgot all caution.

"Who's a dirty coyote?" snorted McHague.

And as McHague snapped his question, his right hand reached back under his coat and whipped out a revolver. But Slim was looking for just such a move, and, before McHague could level the gun, Slim grasped his wrist with both hands, twisting so quickly that the gun went spinning across the floor.

Slim sprang back, leaving McHague cursing wickedly, his shoulders hunched as he faced Bill Smith.

"What kind of a —— deal is that?" he demanded. "You going to double-team me? You've still got a gun."

Bill grinned, as he flipped out his gun and placed it on the bar.

"I better put it away before somebody takes it away from me," he said.

McHague glanced at the bar and back at Bill Smith. Down deep in his heart he did not want to fight. He had been warned that this country was friendly to Tex Rowland, but this seemed to be carrying friendship too far.

There were a number of men in the saloon, and now they swarmed to vantage points. The bartender, in no uncertain terms, swore at everybody concerned, and threatened to make them pay for every bit of damage done. His warnings fell upon deaf ears, whereupon he changed his attitude and offered to bet odds on McHague.

The first blow had not been struck when Big Jim Mott came in. He took in the situation at a glance and shoved his huge bulk between them.

"Here, here!" he grunted. "What the —— is going on? What's all the trouble about, Smith?"

"Ask McHague," grinned Bill. "He tried to fire the first shot."

"Oh, ——, the party's ruined!" wailed Slim.

He crossed the room, picked up McHague's gun and gave it to him. McHague shoved it down in his pocket, glared balefully at Bill Smith and strode out of the saloon.

After a moment's indecision Big Jim turned and followed him outside, catching up with him half-way across the street.

"That's Tex Rowland's friend," said Big Jim. "He's the one I told you about, Mac."

"——, don't I know it?" snarled McHague. "That's what it was all about. I'll shoot the liver out of him if he monkey's with me."

"Well, you better do it from ambush," advised Big Jim. "He's got the punch of an army mule, and he don't wear that gun as a decoration."

"The other one took my gun away from me."

"Then you better thank him the first chance you get, because he probably saved your life."

"These —— cowpunchers can't run no sandy on me, Mott."

"All right, Mac."

"You're —— right, it's all right!"

McHague turned away and went into the hotel. Big Jim looked after him, a scowl on his face. Then he turned and went diagonally down the street toward the bank.

Over in the saloon Slim leaned back

against the bar, roweling a spur thoughtfully against the rail, while Bill Smith faced the bar, as he rolled a cigaret.

"That's what I call stickin' up for a friend," said Slim thoughtfully. "I helped send him over the road. ——, there wasn't nothin' else I could do, under the circumstances. I s'pose he's got them there bloodhounds over here to try and nose out old Tex, eh?"

"Looks like it, Slim."

"Uh-huh. Thousand dollars apiece, eh? Well, I ain't got nothin' again' them flappy-eared, sad-eyed pups, but, by the horns on the moon, they better not start snifflin' around too much."

"They won't do much," said Bill softly. "Let's me and you ride out to the Paint Pot and see how much disinfectant the danged old place needs."

THEY went out to the hitch-rack, mounted their horses and rode away. Bill Smith was not very optimistic over his new job. He did not like the idea of retaining Mike John and Mose Dickey, the two half-breeds. In fact, he did not like the idea of going to work for Big Jim as a manager.

"Well, that gives Big Jim control of every ranch in the Antelope," declared Slim. "The Paint Pot was the last one to fall. If he could buy out Rainbow Valley, he'd have some range, Bill."

"He'll never get that place," declared Bill. "McPherson would rather die than to see Big Jim own Rainbow."

They were opposite the XO-Bar-5 and almost to the forks, where one road led to Rainbow Valley and the other to the Paint Pot, when they met Lohman, the sheriff, Biddy Toole and Dick Clarey, riding furiously toward town.

They drew up in a cloud of dust.

"What's all the rush?" asked Slim, as the three lathering horses danced nervously from their run.

"Old Rory has been shot and badly hurt," explained the sheriff, trying to hold his horse on the road.

"Old Rory McPherson?" blurted Bill Smith. "How did it happen?"

"We don't know," Lohman swore at his horse, pulling it around against Biddy Toole's horse. "Old Rory and his daughter were at Welcome all night. You know about Big Jim demanding her arrest, don't yuh?"

"Well, they came in and stayed all night. Old Rory put up her bond and they started back this mornin'. About two hours later I got a wire from Antelope to come down and join forces with some officers from the penitentiary; and I finds old Rory on the road.

"He's been shot through the body and is in pretty bad shape. We fixed him up as much as possible and we're after a doctor right now."

"But what about Della?" asked Slim anxiously. "Didn't she——"

"That's what we don't know," said Biddy helplessly. "She ain't never come home."

"And she wouldn't go away and leave the old man," added Dick.

"It' a —— or a mixup somewhere," declared Lohman. "And it looks to me like whoever shot the old man took her along with 'em."

"Nobody would dare to do that," declared Bill Smith thickly.

"Wouldn't they?" Thus Dick Clarey bitterly. "Don't fool yourself, stranger. C'm'on, Lohman."

They spurred on, leaving Slim and Bill staring after them.

Bill turned in his saddle, staring blindly up the road, trying to figure out just what to do; trying to realize that some one had stolen Della Marsh.

Far off to the west were the broken heights of the Wild Horse Range, showing almost black in the sunlight. Bill Smith knew those mountains; knew them better than any one in the country. There were few trails, and much of it was impassable.

Beyond the mesas lived the wild goat and big-horn sheep. Bill Smith, when he was Tex Rowland, hunted them on the rocky ledges above the purple chasms, and he knew that there were places in those cliffs where one man could stand off an army.

"That's where she'd be," said Slim, answering Bill's unspoken question. "The —— himself couldn't track anybody there."

"I know it, Slim. C'm'on."

Bill spurred ahead and Slim swung in behind him, wondering where Bill was going. Straight to the Paint Pot ranch they went, with both horses almost collapsing as they drew up at the front of the ranch-house.

Mike John came out to them, his wide

face and black eyes expressionless, although a trifle suspicious of their speedy arrival.

"Where's Pablo?" asked Bill.

Mike John squinted thoughtfully and shook his head.

"Pablo gone."

"Where's Mose Dickey?"

"Down by corral."

"Where's Pokey?"

"Go with Pablo."

"Uh-huh," Bill glanced around quickly. "When did Pablo and Pokey leave here?"

"Yes'day. No come back, I s'pose."

"You suppose not, eh? Where did they go?"

"Long way, I s'pose."

"All right. I'm new boss here, Mike."

Mike grinned slightly. Then he spat and nodded.

"All right," he said. "I don' give——"

Mose Dickey came waddling up from the corral and joined them. His face was as expressionless as Mike John's, but he grinned when the two cowpunchers spoke pleasantly to him.

"Did you hear the quarrel between Pablo and Big Jim?" asked Bill, suddenly inspired with an idea.

The two breeds exchanged quick glances.

"Big Jim told me that Pablo was a thief," said Bill easily. "I don't think Pablo is a thief. Big Jim awful mad at Pablo. He says Pablo no good."

"Um-m-m!" Mike John rumbled throatily. "Big Jim —— fool!"

"That's what I said," nodded Bill.

Slim's long nose was twitching and he wanted to laugh. He did not know what it was all about, but was willing to swear that Bill Smith was right.

"Yeah, he sure is," agreed Bill heartily. "He tell me that he send Pablo to the prison—mebbe."

"By ——, no!" exclaimed Mose Dickey angrily.

"You know how much he pay Pablo?" asked Bill. "Big Jim say he give Pablo much money—much gold."

"—— lie!" snorted Mike. "Big Jim want all money for himself. He no pay Pablo. By ——, no! He tell Pablo, you go to —— away from here. Bimeby somebody put you in jail long time."

"He told Pablo that?" asked Bill.

"Um-m-m. Big Jim two-tongue. He lie to Pablo."

"Uh-huh!"

Bill rolled a cigaret slowly. He was learning a lot from the angry half-breeds, without them suspecting that he was pumping them for information. He lighted his cigaret, inhaled deeply and handed the tobacco and papers to Mike John.

"Mike John, do you know who killed Tucson Charley?" asked Bill Smith.

Mike's eyes lifted from the cigaret-making and bored into those of Bill Smith.

"No," he said softly. "By ——, I like to know."

"No horse kill Tucson Charley," said Mose Dickey. "You go look Tucson Charley; you look at pinto hoof. You know. We see you. Pablo say you look see. What you find out?"

"Didn't a horse kill Tucson Charley?" asked Slim.

"No, Slim. That pinto was barefooted. Tucson Charley might have been kicked by a sharp-shod horse, but not by a clean hoof. A barefooted horse could kill a man, but couldn't leave a wound like that. It looked to me like it had been done with a six-gun barrel, or some heavy instrument."

"I seeum," said Mike John. "Too much cut for bare hoof. That pintado no kick. Broke plenty. I see you throw hat—horse no kick."

"That's right," smiled Bill. "And if that pinto was a kicker he'd 'a' kicked Tucson more than once."

"But who in —— would kill him" queried Slim. "Tucson never done anythin' to anybody."

"Tucson good boy," nodded Mose Dickey sadly. "He goin' marry Alice Spotted Horse. Now can't do."

"Not very well," admitted Bill dryly. "You remember the day Tucson was killed?"

"—— right!" grunted Mike John. "Pablo and Tucson go to Antelope. Pablo go get money from Big Jim. Pablo pay Tucson in Antelope. Pablo come home bimeby. Nex' day Tucson come home dead."

"That's how it was, eh?"

Bill grew thoughtful. There was not much of a clue in that.

"What Big Jim's girl do here that day?" queried Mose.

"Is she Big Jim's girl?" asked Slim.

"—— right. Big Jim marry her—mebbe."

"Mebbe," grinned Bill Smith.

"Why she come?" persisted Mose.

"You remember Tex Rowland?" asked Bill.

"—— right!"

"All right."

Bill squatted on his heels and drew out his tobacco. The others squatted with him and watched his fingers as he deftly rolled a cigaret and handed the sack around the circle. Then:

"Tex Rowland write letter to that girl. You *sabe?*"

The two breeds nodded quickly.

"Tex Rowland give letter to Tucson Charley and tell him to give to girl. Tucson give letter to girl; *sabe?* She write on same letter and give back to Tucson Charley. She tell him to give it to Tex Rowland. Tucson Charley put letter in pocket. Then he drink too much and somebody kill him. Letter gone. That's what girl was out here to get. She wanted the letter. Now you *sabe?*"

"Somebody take letter?" queried Mike John.

"Yeah!"

"Tex Rowland give Tucson Charley letter? Tex Rowland in town?"

Bill laughed softly—

"Looks like it, Mike."

"You think Tex Rowland kill Tucson Charley?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Um-m-m."

Mike John inhaled deeply, letting the smoke curl slowly out of his wide nostrils. Then—

"If Tex Rowland give Tucson Charley letter—Tex Rowland kill Tucson Charley, so Tucson no tell where Tex hide."

"By ——, that so!" Mose said explosively.

Bill got to his feet, a grin on his lips.

"Mike, have you got two good saddle-horses handy?"

"Two —— good pinto. You want."

"Bring 'em out, will yuh? We'll slap our hulls on 'em, Slim. I reckon our broncs are about run to a frazzle."

The two breeds trotted down to the corral where several painted horses were dozing in the shade, while Slim and Bill yanked the saddles off their sweat-stained animals and let them drift away loose.

"How in —— did you know that Big Jim and Pablo had a quarrel, Bill?" queried Slim wonderingly.

"I didn't. Those breeds are like children, Slim. I just had a hunch that they might have had a quarrel, but I didn't ask Mike and Mose if they had; I said they had. If I'd 'a' ask them the question, we'd never found out a thing."

"Where are we goin' now?" asked Slim.

"Back to Antelope, cowboy. When I get an idea I've got to run it plumb ragged, right away, or I might forget what it was."

"All right, pardner," grinned Slim. "Lemme in on the bloody details enough so I'll *sabe* when to yank m' gun."

"You'll know when I do, Slim. Here's the spotted broncs."

THE arrival of the sheriff and the two cowpunchers from the RMP caused plenty of excitement in Antelope. Biddy Toole shoved the doctor into a livery-rig, and they went out of town in a flurry of dust while the sheriff quickly swore in a posse to search the hills for Della Marsh.

The shooting of old Rory McPherson was only a detail compared with the kidnapping of Della Marsh. She was well-known in Antelope, and the sheriff had no trouble of getting more riders than he needed to fill up his posse. In fact, there were several independent detachments started out on their own hook, impatient to put a hangman's knot under the left ear of the man, or men, who would steal a woman.

Big Jim was not in town, having left an hour or two previously for his ranch. McHague and Failing were there, but making no move to assist in the search. Failing was still half-drunk. The dogs had been locked in a store-room at the hotel, where ever and anon they lifted their voices in wailing lamentations.

Slim and Bill met the sheriff and posse a few miles out of town, but only stopped long enough to ask the sheriff the exact spot where old Rory had been found, before galloping into town and leaving their horses at the Fashion hitch-rack.

The town seemed deserted. There was no one, except the bartender and a couple of drunken old bar-flies, in the Fashion, and the bartender welcomed some one to talk to, bewailing the fact that he was too fat to straddle a horse and join the posse.

Failing and McHague started to come into the place, but McHague caught sight of Bill Smith and changed his mind. Failing came on in and joined them at the bar.

"Lots of excitement in the old town," he observed. "I never seen folks get so excited over anythin' in my life."

"Mebbe you ain't lived very long," said Bill slowly. "Anythin' is liable to happen to yuh, if yuh live long enough. Are you McHague's hired man?"

"I'm employed by the prison—not by McHague."

"What's your job around the prison?" asked Slim.

"Oh, kinda general work. I take care of the dogs most of the time. I'm a trainer of bloodhounds. Whatcha drinkin'?"

They named their choice and the conversation lagged for a while. Then Bill Smith got another idea:

"Bloodhounds must be kinda queer critters, Failing. They ain't noways savage, are they?"

"Nossir. Bloodhounds are the kindest thing yuh ever seen."

"Well," Bill laughed softly, "what's to stop a man from just adoptin' one when they're after him?"

"You sure could, if they were turned loose; but we work 'em on a leash all the time."

"Oh, that's the idea, eh? And they can trail anybody by just sniffin' somethin' that the person has wore, can't they?"

"They sure can. Them two dogs are the best you ever seen. I've got 'em locked up in that little buildin' back of the hotel. Can't take a chance with dogs as valuable as them two. Whatcha drinkin'?"

Bill winked at Slim, and when Failing was not looking they poured their drinks into a cuspidor. Round after round of drinks followed that one, until Failing became goggle-eyed and boastful. Slim and Bill became more sober, while the bartender spoke feelingly of —— fools, who would pay good money for whisky and not drink it. But Failing did not pay any attention. He was having a good time.

"I sure reckon that you've got a fine pair of dogs," agreed Bill Smith, after Failing had almost exhausted his vocal cords in describing some of their feats.

"I didn't think so much about 'em, at the time," he explained. "Dogs are just dogs to me, don'tcha know it? But after listenin' to you, I'd sure like to see 'em ag'in."

"Well, ——, come on!" gurgled Failing, shoving himself away from the bar. "I'll show 'em to yuh. I c'n tell yuh lo's of things 'bout dogs. I'm—I'm shome dogger, y'betcha."

"Oh, that's understood," said Bill. "You're a wizard. I betcha you know a lot more about dogs than the dogs know about themselves."

"I don't wan' to brag, y'understand," explained Failing. "I'm modesht, I am; but—c'mon."

They followed him across the street, assisting him in keeping right side up. There was no sign of McHague, for which Bill was grateful. Failing led them to the rear of the hotel and fumbled with a key until Slim took it away from him and unlocked the door.

The two bloodhounds proceeded to climb all over their keeper and he sat down in the middle of the floor, slapping weakly at them. Slim shut the door behind them, laughing at the drunken Failing trying to protect himself from the dogs.

Then Failing gave it up as a bad job, stretched out on the floor and proceeded to snore raucously. The two dogs sat down on their haunches and looked sadly at him. They merely glanced at Bill, as he snapped the leashes on to their collars, but seemed willing to follow him.

"What's the idea?" asked Slim.

"We're goin' to swipe these dogs, Slim. We'll likely have to pack 'em in our arms when we get on our broncs."

"I getcha," snorted Slim. "We use 'em to trail Della, eh?"

Bill hesitated. There was one thing he had overlooked.

"We've got to have somethin' that she wore, Slim."

"By golly, that's right, Bill! Say, she used to work at that little female's hat-store just down the street, and mebbe they've got somethin' there. You wait here, while I take a look."

Slim was back in a few minutes, highly elated.

"I got her old apron," he grinned. "The little female wanted to talk about it, but I didn't have time. Now what do we do?"

"Get out of town. I hope to gosh that nobody sees us."

They locked the door behind them, leaving Failing snoring peacefully. The dogs were willing to go fast, but the two cow-punchers snubbed them up close and went carefully back to the street.

There was no one in sight; so they hurried over to the hitch-rack and untied their horses. Both animals objected strenuously to having the bloodhounds hoisted upon them, but the two men were not concerned with the likes and dislikes of the two pinto horses.

As they swung into their saddles some one yelled at them from down the street, and they turned to see McHague running toward them from the hotel, waving his arms.

"Aw, ——!" snorted Slim, shifting the dog's weight to his left hand and arm. "I s'pose I'll have to kill this jigger."

"There's Big Jim ridin' in," chuckled Bill Smith, nodding toward the lower end of the street. "——, we might as well have advertised our departure."

McHague was still coming, swearing at them for being a pair of thieves. The two pintos twisted and whirled around, anxious to run.

Wham!

Slim's bullet splatted into the dust in front of McHague, and went *powee-e-e-ing* down the street. McHague stopped so quick that he almost fell on his face. Slim threw up his gun again, but McHague did not wait to see where the next shot would strike.

He whirled and went galloping down the street, losing his hat at the first jump. Slim yipped softly and sent another bullet straight down the street, over McHague's, head. McHague gave one long leap ahead, ducked sidewise and fairly fell over the sidewalk into an alley.

Then the two cowpunchers whirled their pinto mounts around and went galloping out of town, hanging on to the bloodhounds, which threatened to leave them at every jerk of the running horses.

"Yuh missed him both shots, Slim," yelled Bill, as they swept out through the hills.

"Practise makes perfect," laughed Slim joyously. "Mebbe I won't miss him next time."

Big Jim lost no time in riding up to McHague, who was sitting up in the alley, swearing bitterly. His pants were split at the knees and both of his hands were filled with splinters from the old sidewalk.

"They stole my hounds!" he howled at Big Jim. "That —— friend of Tex Rowland's swiped my dogs, so I couldn't use 'em in trailin' Tex. By ——, I'll send 'em both up for this."

Big Jim did not sympathize with McHague, who talked rather disjointedly about what he was going to do. Finally he bewailed the fact that the sheriff was out hunting for a kidnapper and that there was nobody to rescue his dogs.

"What in —— are you talking about?" demanded Big Jim.

"Didn't you hear about it?" queried McHague. "An old jigger named McPherson got shot and they can't find his daughter. The whole —— town, including the sheriff, is huntin' for her."

Big Jim grunted, swung off his horse and strode into the saloon, where he secured the rest of the information from the bartender, who was more than willing to tell all he knew. Big Jim's jaw tightened as he turned and strode outside.

McHague was waiting outside for him. Big Jim considered him for a moment. Then:

"Go to the livery-stable and get a horse and saddle!" he barked. "Tell 'em to give you a good horse. Ask the stable-man to lend you a pair of chaps, too."

McHague trotted toward the stable while Big Jim went into the bank, and came out in a minute carrying two rifles in scabbards. He swung on to his horse, rode down to the stable and helped McHague get ready. A few moments later they galloped out of Antelope, heading toward the northern part of the range.

VIII

IT WAS fairly late in the afternoon when Slim and Bill found the spot where old Rory McPherson had been shot. The sheriff and posse had been there judging from the horse-tracks in the dusty road. Both men were almost exhausted from holding the dogs in their arms.

They dismounted and let the dogs sniff at Della's old apron. Quickly they circled, nosing in the dust, while both men held a leash tightly. After a moment they worked off the side of the road, whining softly.

"The trail was just about ten feet long," said Slim sadly, as the dogs converged and began circling again.

"She got off her horse, walked this far and got on again," declared Bill. "But it looks like she went east. My ——, that's an awful country to hunt anybody in."

"But she can't ride a horse very far into the Wild Horses," observed Slim hopefully. "She'll either walk or be carried by somethin' besides a horse. What'll we do, Bill?"

"Pack these —— dogs as far as we can ride and then let 'em hunt for tracks. It's, goin' to be dark before we can get very far and it looks like a storm."

Thunder-heads were piling up back of the Wild Horses, but were yet too far away for the two cowpunchers to estimate the path of the storm. They picked up their dogs and rode straight toward the mountains.

"I've been up in them mountains in a storm," said Bill, as he squinted narrowly at the clouds. "There's a lot of mineral in them cliffs—iron, I reckon—and the way that old lightnin' can splatter around up there is a caution to cats."

"You've been up there?" queried Slim wonderingly.

Bill Smith bit his lip and shifted the weight of his dog. He had forgotten that Bill Smith was a stranger to that country. He glanced at Slim who was looking straight at him.

"On the other side of the range, Slim," he said. "They're the same on both sides."

"Oh, yeah!"

Slim nodded, but Bill knew that the explanation had not been satisfactory. Several times during that ride toward the mountains, Bill noticed that Slim looked curiously at him.

It was almost dark when they reached the foot of the cliffs, where the mass of slide-rock precluded any further riding on horseback. They dismounted and tied the horses in a jack-pine thicket where they would be protected from rain and wind.

"It's a —— of a hopeless proposition," observed Bill sadly. "All we can do is to skirt the slides and hope to —— that these million-dollar hounds will pick up a scent. If it rains hard they won't be no good to us, 'cause rain will wash out the scent."

"Miles and miles of it, too," said Slim hopelessly. "Mebbe we better give it up as a bad job, Bill."

Bill squinted at the sky which was already overcast. A rumble of thunder came to their ears, but from a great distance. Bill turned and held out his hand to Slim as he said:

"Give me your dog, Slim. You stay here with the horses and wait for me to come back."

"You aim to go it alone, Bill?" asked Slim.

"Sure."

"Uh-huh." Slim scratched the back of his head and spat reflectively. "You know this girl, Bill?"

"I've seen her. Why do yuh ask that, Slim?"

"Well," Slim shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. "You ain't stuck on her, are yuh, Bill?"

"Mebbe," Bill smiled softly.

"Me, too," nodded Slim. "I've knowed her a long time, Bill. I reckon I've—but yuh see, she's still stuck on Tex Rowland. We ain't got a ghost of a chance—we ain't. Yo're a good lookin' sort of a jigger, Bill; but that won't help yuh none."

Bill laughed softly and slapped Slim on the back.

"We won't cut in on Tex Rowland, will we?" queried Slim. "I want her and you want her, but we'll give Tex a square deal, won't we, Bill?"

Bill Smith's eyes softened as he looked into Slim's honest face. Slim had confessed his love for Della Marsh, but was willing to stand aside for a man he believed to be hiding away from the law; a man he had helped send to prison.

"I just told yuh that so yuh'd know how I stood, Bill," said Slim slowly.

"All right, pardner," agreed Bill. "You're a square-shooter and I'm with yuh. Now, let's go and find her."

They gave the hounds another scent of the calico apron before they started off across the slide-rock, traveling north. It was hard going. The light grew more dim each minute and the high walls of the cliffs were like inky towers, reaching into the sky.

The wind whipped into a gale, but as yet there was no rain. It screamed around the cliffs, and the night blotted out the landscape until neither of them was able to see the dogs which clambered over the rocks a few feet ahead of them, still pulling hard on their leash.

High-heeled boots are hardly the proper foot-gear for rocky traveling, even in daylight, and both men were almost exhausted after a mile of slipping and sliding. The storm was nearer now, but the lightning glare was broken by the high cliffs which threw them in the dense shadow.

Then Slim bumped into Bill and grasped him by the arm. They halted together, shielding their faces from the drift of rain which had just blown in. Another glare of lightning lighted up the world beyond them; a glare that held long enough for Bill to see why Slim had stopped him.

Just beyond them, and not over a hundred yards away, was a man on a pinto horse riding parallel with them. They could see him humped in his saddle, forcing the horse against the storm.

The flash faded, leaving them staring into inky blackness. For several moments they stood still, waiting for the next flash which showed the rider still going ahead. The thunder roared like the discharge of a mighty cannon and the rocks jarred heavily.

The two cowpunchers started on; but now they swung to the left and got out of the slide-rock where the traveling was better, but where the force of the storm almost blew them off their feet.

It was impossible to converse except by shouting into each other's ears. The lightning did not show them the rider now, but they knew he must be still ahead of them; so they put down their heads and staggered on. It was raining harder now and they were getting drenched.

Through a jack-pine thicket they forced their way, skirting the slide-rock, stumbling over rocks, tearing their clothes on the branches of down-timber. Suddenly another flash of lightning sent its blinding glare down across the slopes, and both men stopped short. Just a few feet away stood the pinto, its rump turned toward the wind and rain, its head hanging down.

There was no sign of the rider. Bill and Slim moved close together, edging their way over to the pinto, which stood stock-still and let them make an examination.

"Tied to a snag!" Bill yelled his information into Slim's ear. "Swing to the right! He must 'a' gone toward the cliffs."

They left the pinto and headed back into the land of slide-rock. The lightning gave them intermittent illumination, but between flashes the world was a vast, inky void. The rocks sloped upward, slippery with rain; but the two men and the dogs managed to make a certain progress, however painful.

They halted against the side of the protecting cliffs out of the force of the wind and tried to take stock of their surroundings. They were able to carry on a conversation here. The cliffs still jarred from the thunder, but the storm was working its way down the slopes into Antelope.

"Who in —— was on that pinto?" queried Slim.

"I dunno," said Bill pantingly, "but I'll bet he ain't up here for his health. The question is: Where did he go? It's a cinch he didn't go down-hill. Let's pesticate along here, Slim."

"All right. I'll betcha these here dogs won't be worth no thousand dollars when we get through with 'em. I've stepped on mine seven times."

"They're sure as —— a patient animal," laughed Bill. "If I ever want a dog that don't care what happens to 'em, I'll get me a bloodhound. C'm'on."

Slowly they worked their way along the side of the cliff. It was difficult traveling, because they could not tell when a mis-step might drop them off into a fissure or on to a lower level. At times they were against the wall of rock, and at another they were forced to move away to circle an obstruction.

They had traveled possibly fifty yards and were working their way around a shelf or rock, when Slim's voice arose in anger:

"C'm'on, you danged flop-eared mongrel! Where do yuh think yo're goin', anyway?"

"What's the matter with him?" yelled Bill, who was slightly in the lead.

"Anchored, b'gosh! Whoa, you darned fool!"

The dog was pulling back on the leash and Slim almost fell down in turning around on a slippery rock. Bill came back and they went up to the dog. The other hound whined and managed to tangle the leash around Bill's legs in its eagerness to get in on the situation.

"My dog's hit a trail!" exclaimed Slim. "C'm'on, Bill!"

Bill untangled the leash and the hound immediately shot in past Slim.

"I wish t' gosh I could see somethin'," complained Slim. "I can feel this darned dog, but I can't see him. I tell yuh he's got a trail."

"Mine's got the fever, too!" exclaimed Bill. "Go to it, pup!"

Slowly they worked their way into what seemed to be a narrow passageway into the cliffs. At times they could feel the right-hand walls and again they would collide with those on the left side.

The dogs swung to the right for a distance and then to the left. The thunder had almost died away in the distance now and there was little sound, except the gurgle of running water off the rocks and the scrape of their boots, as they wended their way into a place where neither of them had ever been.

"It's gettin' wider out here," said Slim, as they halted for a few moments. "I can feel it, Bill. That must 'a' been a narrow gorge through there, don'tcha think?"

"Sure felt like it. Is your dog doin' any pullin' now?"

"Not so much. He sure was smellin' somethin' though. This must 'a' been where the pinto rider came through. I'll be danged if I like this idea of runnin' blind in this place. Yuh never can tell what you'll fall into. Didja ever see such a storm in your life? Honest to gosh, I got scared of that lightnin'."

It was dark and dismal in there now, and a cold wind began to blow through their wet clothes. Both of the hounds were casting about, trying to locate a trail which had probably been washed out in the downpour of rain.

"We hit that trail where it was protected from the rain," said Bill thoughtfully. "Now we've got to go by guess and by gosh."

"Looks like it," agreed Slim wearily, sloshing in his wet boots. "I don't mind goin', if I've got somewhere to go."

THEY were staring into the black world ahead of them when suddenly there appeared a tiny light. It was impossible for them to tell what it was or how far it was away.

"Now that beats ——!" muttered Slim. "Looks like a light in a house; but there ain't——!"

"It went out for a moment," interrupted Bill. "There, it's on again. It's a light in a house, Slim; and somebody walked between the light and us."

"But what house?" complained Slim. "There ain't no house up here."

"There she goes!" grunted Bill.

"By gosh, it is a house!" exploded Slim. "They done pulled down the curtain."

"It's a house all right," muttered Bill. "I think they put out the light instead of pullin' down a curtain. Let's see if we can find a place to hang up for the night. I've got a idea that said house wouldn't be a-tall friendly to us, Slim. It's in a place where honest men wouldn't pick for a home; and the best thing we can do is to wait until mornin' before doin' a lot of investigatin'. I reckon it's better to be safe than sorry."

"You sure handled my idea to a gnat's whisker," agreed Slim. "But I dunno where we'll find a bood-wah in these rocks. My gosh, this country sure has been laundered to the queen's taste."

They moved slowly on, feeling their way along, but working their way to the right of where they had seen the lighted window. Suddenly Slim gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Found a place," he said. "Bumped my head on it, too. Feels kinda dry."

A closer investigation disclosed the fact, that Slim had found a spot where an overhanging cliff had protected a few square feet of ground in an angle of the rocks. It was not an ideal place to spend the night, but it was dry and offered refuge from the wind, which blew cold from the tops of the Wild Horse range.

The hounds curled up in the corner, while the two cowpunchers sat close together, denying themselves a cigaret, and waited for morning. They were tired, wet and hungry, but neither complained.

"We'll prob'ly warm up in the mornin'," said Bill meaningly, as they humped dismally against the rock.

"Not me," replied Slim. "I may get excited as ——, but I'll never get warm ag'in. This is what you'd call a damp-cold. I'm sure goin' to kick —— out of these million-dollar dogs if they just led us in here to get out of the wet."

It was a long night. The wind grew colder and an occasional flurry of rain whipped into their shelter. Neither of them were able to sleep more than a few minutes at a time. A wild-cat almost ran into them, squalling with anger and alarm as it sprang away from the sudden scent of human beings and dogs. Down the wind came the wailing of a coyote pack, baffled in their nightly hunt by the extreme darkness.

Daylight came slowly and the morning mists of the cañon lifted like steam from a giant boiler. They tied the dogs to a fallen tree and began working their way up the cañon. The mist was so heavy that they were unable to see any distance, but it was much easier traveling than it had been in the dark.

Through rifts in the mist they could see the cliffs ahead of them. There was much down-timber, laurel and jack-pines, which impeded their progress. Then, through a pocket in the mist, Bill Smith caught a glimpse of the cabin.

It was situated in an angle of the cliffs across the cañon from them, about fifty feet higher than they were standing. It was only a glimpse, but it gave him the exact location and a fair idea of how to reach there.

"We'll have to hurry," he told Slim. "This fog won't last much longer and there's nothin' but rocks for cover between here and there."

"Got to get within six-gun range, that's a cinch," panted Slim. "You lead the way, Willyum."

Across the slippery rocks they made their way, working to the right of the cabin with the intention of approaching it from the rear. They reached the cliffs and began working around to the left. The mists from the lower cañon were rising up past them now and they were unable to see anything.

Suddenly Bill stopped. Just in front of him was the corner of the cabin; so close, in fact, that he had almost bumped his head on one of the projecting logs. Slim moved in beside him and they silently studied their next move.

"We'll try the rear," whispered Bill softly. "Go easy and keep your gun handy."

Slowly they worked their way between the cliff and the cabin, which were so close together that there was barely room for a person to walk. There they found a door, located just beyond the center of the cabin, which seemed to be about thirty feet in length.

For several moments they listened closely at the door, but there was no sound from within. Bill pushed softly against the door and it creaked open.

From within came the odors of cooked food and the smell of wood-smoke, but no one challenged their right to open the door. Cautiously they peered inside.

It was a two-room cabin, rudely furnished. They stepped softly inside, their guns handy. Across the room was a double-decked bunk, built into the corner of the wall. There was a crudely built table and a low stool. The flooring of the cabin was of packed earth—uneven and unclean.

The opening between the two rooms was a sawed-out space, about five feet by three feet, without either door or curtain. In the other room they found another double-decked bunk, a fireplace, table and two rough benches. The dirt roof of the cabin was not water-proof, judging from the little pools of water in the low places of the dirt floor.

A once-gaudy blanket hung over the edge of the upper bunk, and a tumbled mass of old blankets in the lower bunk attested to the fact that some one had spent the night there. The room was warm, although the fire had been put out. Evidently some one had thrown a bucketful of water into the fireplace.

There was a front door, roughly made of hand-hewn timber, and beside it was a small window aperture, *sans* window, but with a hinged board which would lift to show a view of the cañon. There were several apertures between the logs left, no doubt, for loop-holes.

Bill peered out through one of these apertures, jerked back and whirled on Slim who was reaching for that door.

"Two men comin'!" he exclaimed in a whisper. "C'm'on!"

They darted into the other room and stopped near the door.

"How close are they?" whispered Slim.

"Right up to us," whispered Bill softly. "Let's take a chance."

He stepped across the room, climbed to the upper bunk, while Slim followed him. The bunk was fairly high and by crowding against the wall they would be partly hid from any one below.

They had barely stretched out when they heard the front door open. There was no sound for several moments; then they heard a soft footstep. Some one had come to the opening between the two rooms. Then big Jim Mott's voice said—

"Nobody around here, but they've been here a short time ago."

"—— place I ever tried to get to," complained McHague's voice wearily. "I hope to —— I never have to crawl over them wet rocks again. I don't see how you ever found it, Jim."

"Knowing where it was helped me," laughed Big Jim.

"Well, it's sure —— well hid," declared

McHague. "Don't anybody know where it is?"

"Nobody but Pablo and his gang. I've been here twice. Pablo built it a year or so ago."

"Regular rustler's roost, eh?" grunted McHague.

"Yes. Pablo wanted a place to hole-up in. He's afraid of the law." Big Jim laughed.

"Well, what did you expect to find here—the girl?" asked McHague.

"Perhaps."

He turned back toward the door and they splashed through the puddles on the floor.

Slim and Bill raised up slightly and looked at each other. Slim's lips framed an "Oh!", but there was no sound. McHague and Big Jim were talking softly to each other. The back door creaked very slightly and Bill lifted his head, peering with one eye.

The door had swung partly open, disclosing Pablo, a rifle gripped in both hands. Softly he slipped through the doorway with the rifle at his shoulder. He passed out of Bill's vision, and a moment later his voice hissed softly—

"Not move—please!"

For several moments there was no sound. Then:

"Drop guns on floor," ordered Pablo.

The front door creaked and Big Jim's voice rasped angrily:

"The whole works, eh? Pokey Speed and Mike John."

"—— right!" grunted Mike John's voice.

An interval of silence, except for shuffling feet, before Pablo spoke again—

"You got all gun, Mike?"

"—— right."

"Set down," ordered Pablo.

"What's all this about?" queried McHague, a note of fear in his voice. "I thought you owned this bunch of breeds, Jim."

"No more," said Pablo quickly, and his statement was echoed by Mike John's—

"—— right!"

"Well, what are you going to do?" demanded Big Jim.

"You in hurry?" asked Pokey Speed in an amused voice.

"Nobody see you come," stated Pablo. "Nobody know how to find this place. Why you come, Big Jim?"

"You know —— well why I came," retorted Big Jim.

Pablo laughed.

"I know why. Mike John see you pass ranch last night. He come and tell me."

Slim and Bill exchanged glances of understanding. It was Mike John on the pinto in the lightning glare. He had come to tell Pablo that Big Jim was coming.

"He must 'a' had a swell time," grunted McHague dismally. "I never seen a storm like that before in my life. By ——, it just blew us off the mountain."

"Nobody find this place," said Pablo.

"Don't fool yourself," said Big Jim quickly.

"You tell?"

There was menace in Pablo's voice.

"He lie," declared Mike John. "He try scare you, Pablo."

"Oh, ——!" snorted McHague. "What's it all about, anyway?"

"I know you," said Pablo. "You boss of prison, eh? Big Jim say you take me to prison. He say I get to —— out of here, or I go to prison."

"That's right," agreed McHague.

"—— wrong!" snorted Mike John.

"You'll go to prison, if I ever tell on you, Pablo," declared Big Jim warningly. Pablo laughed.

"You not tell, Big Jim."

"—— right!" added Mike John. "You no talk now."

"Hey! What the ——'s all this about?" McHague's voice was filled with apprehension.

"Set down!" snapped Pablo, "I'm boss now."

"Well, I never done nothin' to you."

"You never have chance."

The three half-breeds laughed. Slim and Bill were sitting up in the bunk now, looking at each other wonderingly. They were hearing things that made them wonder.

"Where is that girl?" demanded Big Jim.

"You think I'm fool?" queried Pablo. "I work for you long time, Big Jim. I'm 'fraid of you. You tell me you send me to prison. Pablo scare at prison."

"You bet I'll send you to prison. You try to double-cross me and you'll sure go up for life. You got off pretty easy when they sent old Hump Sherill to prison, Pablo. You know —— well it was your work—not Hump Sherrill's."

Pablo did not reply. Bill Smith shut his jaw tightly and the ball of his thumb caressed the hammer of his big six-gun. Now he knew that poor old Hump had been framed into prison.

"And it's a wonder they didn't get you instead of Tex Rowland," continued Big Jim. "Tex scared you away before you could brand that RMP mare, and it just happened that Crane and Slim found him inside the corral."

"I steal horse for you," said Pablo accusingly. "You give me nothin'. You say all the time you send me to prison if I no do this."

Slim swore softly and nodded at Bill Smith.

"I no go to prison," said Pablo. "I fool you."

"Well, what are you going to do?" demanded Big Jim.

"I know you come here," exclaimed Pablo. "You know this place."

Big Jim swore heartily and Pablo grunted for him to sit still.

"I steal girl," confessed Pablo. "She your girl, Big Jim. You call me Injun snake and say you have me hung; so I get even with you now. You know I steal girl; so you come here. I know you come here."

"—— smart!" grunted Mike John in appreciation.

"This is a —— of a mix-up," declared McHague. "I dunno why yuh dragged me into it, Jim. I've done your dirty work, too."

"Shut up!" snapped Big Jim. "You're still alive."

And then to Pablo:

"How much you want, Pablo? How much money?"

"No money."

"No money, eh? Then what do you want?"

"You wait see."

"—— right." Mike John laughed loudly.

"You shot old Rory McPherson," accused Big Jim.

"You tell me sometime I shoot him," retorted Pablo. "I no shoot him for you; I shoot him to steal girl. Him old man—die pretty soon, anyway."

"That's kinda cold-blooded," observed McHague.

"You shut up," ordered Pablo. "You go to —— pretty soon."

"Say, you ain't sore at me," wailed McHague. "I never done nothin' to you, Pablo."

"You bring hounds to hunt men."

"But I wasn't huntin' you, Pablo. You're Big Jim's friend."

"That —— lie!" exclaimed Mike John.

"This is all foolishness," declared Big Jim. "Pablo, you turn that girl over to us and get out of the country. If you stay here, they'll hang you in spite of anything I can do. Don't yuh know what it means to steal a girl?"

"Girl all right," stated Pablo. "I no want girl. I steal her to make you come. She no get hurt."

"But what do you want of me?" demanded Big Jim hotly.

Pablo laughed.

"You not smart man; you —— fool. Bimeby the wolf find this cabin. Door open, nobody live here. You no send Pablo to prison, Big Jim. Pablo treat wolf. How you like that?"

Big Jim laughed, but there was no mirth. He was afraid, and the half-breeds knew it.

"You couldn't kill me," said Big Jim, trying to be boastful. "You're afraid, Pablo. They'd get you pretty quick. Those hounds would trail you into ——, you dirty half-breed."

"Mebbe I no kill you."

Pablo's voice did not show indecision. He spoke gutturally, and a moment later Slim and Bill ducked down as Mike John glided past their bunk and went out the rear door.

"Listen to me, Pablo," Big Jim was talking again. "You let up on all this foolishness and save your own hide. Turn the girl over to us and we'll swear to let you have a chance to get out of the country safe. If you stay here they'll skin you alive."

"Mebbe. I take chance. You lie plenty to me, Big Jim. Pablo no go to prison."

"But what about me?" queried McHague. "I ain't got nothin' to do with this. I don't even belong in this country. You ain't got nothin' against me, Pablo."

"You have bad luck," replied Pablo. "You know too much—see too much."

"——, I won't never say a word," promised McHague, pleadingly. "I want to get out of here."

"Where you want go, eh?"

"Back where I came from, by ——!"

"Where your dogs?"

"Stolen. Slim Whelan and Bill Smith stole 'em. They wanted to keep me from trailin' Tex Rowland."

Pablo laughed throatily.

"Steal your dogs, eh? Bill Smith. By, ——, that good! Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

A MOMENT later the rear door creaked open and Bill Smith almost spoke aloud with surprize. Alice Spotted Horse came in, with Della Marsh close behind her. Behind them came Mike John, closing the door.

Della Marsh was not bound in any way, but she looked weary and bedraggled. She was clad in her riding clothes, which had been torn in spots and covered with dirt. Her hair fell in a tumbled mass about her shoulders.

They passed into the next room. For a moment there was silence and then Big Jim's voice saying:

"Well, we found you, Della; but it didn't do us much good. We are prisoners, too."

Bill Smith grinned when Della ignored Big Jim's statement.

"What's the idea of the Injun woman?" asked Big Jim.

"She Alice Spotted Horse," said Pablo.

"Yes, I know who she is," said Big Jim. "She works for Crane."

"She not work for Crane now. She was goin' marry Tucson Charley. Charley dead now."

"You —— right!" grunted Mike John. "Tucson Charley dead as ——."

"I understand all that," Big Jim growled with impatience.

"You know what kill Tucson Charley?"

"Horse killed him," growled Big Jim.

"——d lie!" Mike John fairly barked his denial.

"He got drunk and the horse kicked him to death," declared Big Jim. "Everybody knows that, Pablo."

"Nobody knows—nobody sees. I *sabe* what kill Charley."

"All right." Big Jim growled angrily. "I don't see what that has to do with us."

Bill and Slim were on their knees, trying to poke a hole in the chinking of the partition so they might see what was going on in the other room; but without any success. Pablo was talking now and the two cowpunchers on the upper bunk leaned out across the footboard, and listened closely.

"Tucson Charley have letter from Tex Rowland. He give letter to this girl. She send letter back to Tex Rowland. Somebody kill Tucson Charley. Somebody write that note, Big Jim."

"Tex Rowland wrote it, didn't he?"

There was a note of alarm in Big Jim's voice now.

"Tex Rowland not write it," declared Pablo. "You want Tex Rowland in prison. You —— glad he go prison. You want girl; you want hurt old man in Rainbow Valley. You no want Tex get loose. You write letter, by ——! You kill Tucson Charley, Big Jim!"

"That's a lie!" Big Jim yelped his denial. "Why, you dirty half-breed, you lie! Tex Rowland wrote that note. The sheriff has the note now. He—he——"

"Who stole note from Tucson Charley?" demanded Pablo. "Sheriff not steal it. You stole it. Tex Rowland never wrote note."

"How in —— do you know that?" asked Big Jim hoarsely.

"Tex Rowland not have to write note. Tex Rowland not have to write note to girl when he can see girl."

"What do you mean?"

Pablo laughed hoarsely, triumphantly.

"Pablo know. Injun see things, Big Jim. Man have 'nother face, but same body. Injun sees man's hands, man's legs. Pablo know Tex Rowland. First time no *sabe*. See man roll cigaret, see man smoke. See man get on horse. Man ride same with one face same as 'nother. Injun see much; white man —— fool."

"What do you mean, Pablo?" Della Marsh spoke for the first time since she had entered the room.

Pablo laughed softly.

"You know Bill Smith? Mebbe horse kick him, I dunno. Got new face—same body, same hands. Bill Smith same as Tex Rowland. By ——, I laugh all time. Tex Rowland come back to find out."

"Bill Smith?" Big Jim almost screamed. "You lie! Why, they don't ——"

"Pancho knew him!" cried Della. "That big dog knew him. Where is he, Pablo?"

"And Big Jim killed Tucson Charley," said Pablo slowly. "I let Alice Spotted Horse know. She come here to pay Big Jim for kill Tucson Charley. She know how. Mike John, you get rope."

The shock of exposure had over-balanced

Bill Smith and Slim Whelan. They had leaned far out, so as not to miss a single word of Pablo's expose, and the rickety bunk swayed away from the wall.

And before they could throw themselves back, the whole thing ripped away from the wall, swayed outward and came down with a splintering crash on the dirt floor.

Both men were thrown almost across the room, rolling into the wall and clawing wildly for their balance. The crash of the fall had come as a complete surprize to those in the next room; but Big Jim saw in a flash that this was his supreme chance.

Swiftly he dived across the space between himself and Pablo, knocking the breed aside and securing a rifle. He slithered sidewise against the wall, but fell on his knees, striving to swing the gun into position.

But as quick as a cat Pablo flashed through the partition doorway, drawing his gun and knocking Della flat on the floor as he went past her. Pokey Speed threw himself into a crouching position against the wall, his six-shooter spouting lead at the two figures in the other room; while Mike John dropped behind the stunned McHague and tugged at the six-shooter, which had caught in the waist-band of his overalls.

Bullets from Pokey Speed's gun thudded into the logs over Bill Smith's head as fast as Pokey could pull the trigger. Pablo had flung himself against the wall, out of line with Pokey Speed's bullets, and now he swayed back and shot twice at Big Jim in the other room, before the gun went spinning out of his hand when Bill Smith's first bullet crashed into his elbow.

It was all happening in split seconds. Pablo staggered sidewise and went down against the wall, helpless and harmless. Both Slim and Bill were shooting at Pokey Speed, and he pitched forward on his face. The room was hazy with smoke now. Another gun was still working. Bill rushed to the doorway just as Big Jim's rifle shot shook the room. Mike John had got to his feet, his back against the wall, his face twisted with pain. Then his head dropped forward and he crumpled.

The smoke blew into Bill Smith's face as he ducked low and darted into the room. McHague was sprawled face down in the middle of the floor and the door was wide open. Alice Spotted Horse had not moved from her position during the shooting and Della was still sprawled on the floor where Pablo's shove had landed her.

Bill Smith ran to the door and looked out. There was no sign of Big Jim. He whirled and ran back, meeting Slim in the doorway. The lanky cowboy had been shot through the arm, and his ankle was sprained from his fall; but he had shifted his gun to his left hand and was looking for more trouble.

"Big Jim got away!" panted Bill.

"Out there!" Pablo raised himself up and pointed toward the rear door. "He go up cliff! Hurry up—fast!"

Bill ran out the rear door, looking wildly around. Just to the left was a rocky crevice, which broke in angles up the side of the sheer cliffs. About sixty feet up this crevice was Big Bill, while below him swayed a crude rope ladder. It was Pablo's getaway to the top of the cliffs.

Big Bill still clung to his rifle. He was having difficulty with the tangled ropes. Bill steadied himself against the back of the cabin and lifted his gun.

"Stop!" he yelled hoarsely. "Don't move, Big Jim!"

The big man twisted around and looked at the man below him. Big Jim had been shot, but there was still fight left in him. He swung his back against the side of the cliff and fired the rifle in one hand; but the bullet merely screamed off the rocks twenty feet away from his target.

Bill Smith lifted his gun slowly as Big Jim worked frantically to lever another cartridge into the chamber of his rifle. But before Bill could pull the trigger of his six-shooter his ears were almost deafened by the crash of a shot, fired just past his head. He whirled quickly. In the doorway beside him stood Alice Spotted Horse, a smoking rifle in her hands, looking up at Big Jim, who slowly let go with his hands and fell out his entire length and crashed against the cliff, hanging by one foot which had become entangled in the ropes.

Bill Smith shut his eyes for a moment, and to his ears came Alice Spotted Horse's soft exclamation—

"I be ——!"

There were other voices now. Some one was shouting his name. A big, blue dog came rushing through the doorway and almost knocked him down. It was Pancho, his big jaws slavering as he fairly moaned with excitement.

A moment later Biddy Toole and Dick Clarey almost fell out through the doorway and behind them came Lohman, the sheriff.

"My ——, what a clean-up!" exclaimed Lohman. "There's Big Jim! Holy smoke, tell us about it, Smith."

"Bill Smith, ——!" Thus Slim painfully, but with a grin on his lips. "Pablo knew him. That's old Tex, I tell yuh! Where he got his face—I dunno; but it's old Tex."

The others stared at him, as at a ghost; their faces showing their unbelief.

"Yeah, I'm Tex Rowland," said Bill Smith. "I got in a wreck and the doctors made me a new face."

Della Marsh came out to him, wonderingly, half-afraid. He held out his hand to her, a smile on his face.

"Pancho knew you," she said slowly. "You can't fool a dog."

"Nor a half-breed," added Slim painfully.

"But what is it all about?" demanded Lohman. "What was all this killing about, Tex?"

Tex turned and walked into the cabin, followed by the questioning three. He looked over the victims. Pokey Speed was dead—riddled with bullets. Mike John's soul had fled to the happy hunting grounds of his ancestors; but Pablo was able to sit up and scowl defiance at every one.

As they looked at him, McHague rolled over and tried to get up. Biddy Toole helped him to a sitting position against the wall, where he sat limply and goggled at every one.

"Somebody must 'a' belted him over the head with a gun," said Biddy. "He's sure got a lumpy-lookin' cranium."

"Mike John hit um," offered Alice Spotted Horse.

McHague spat painfully and looked around. It took him some time to remember what had happened. Then:

"My, ——, that was awful," he said wearily. "Where's Big Jim?"

"Big Jim is dead," said some one.

"Did Pablo kill him?"

"The Injun woman killed him," said Tex.

"I suppose it's just as well," said McHague painfully, as he squinted up at Lohman. "You're the sheriff?"

"How did you fellers find the way in here?" queried Tex.

"We've got Mose Dickey tied up down the hill," grinned Lohman. "We hunted with the big dog from the RMP and accidentally ran into Mose. He was on his way here, and between what he'd tell us, and what the dog knew about tracks, we got into this hole in the world in time to hear the battle start."

"Rory told us that Pablo and Pokey shot him and took Della," said Dick Clarey. "So that's how we happened to trail Mose. My ——, I can't hardly believe that you're Tex."

"Old Pancho found them bloodhounds," grinned Biddy. "There ain't no bloodhounds now. Must be a grudge between Pancho's breed and them sad-faced animals."

"Well, who do I arrest, Tex?" queried Lohman foolishly. "I'm still thinkin' in circles."

As swiftly as possible, Tex sketched out what had happened, while McHague nodded dismally.

"That's all true, I reckon," he agreed. "Big Jim got the job for me at the penitentiary, and he made me hold up Tex's mail. He said there was a movement on foot to get Tex pardoned, and he wanted me to fix it so that Tex would never come out. And like a —— fool, I tried it. Old Hump Sherrill ruined the game.

"I knew that Big Jim was a crook; but I didn't know he was as bad as this. When I had that trouble with Tex the other day, I had a feelin' that he—well, I didn't think he was Tex; but I felt that somethin' was wrong."

"I know him," grinned Pablo. "I'm Injun."

Lohman jerked his head toward Alice Spotted Horse—

"What about her, Tex?"

"Big Jim killed her sweetheart, Lohman. She only made him pay. I knew that Big Jim was a crook. McHague gave the snap away that night I made my getaway. Big Jim was the only one who could have had that much influence. We'll consider that Pablo turned State's evidence, Lohman, and let the law go as easy as possible."

"But he shot Rory McPherson and kidnapped Miss Marsh."

"Rory will get well," said Biddy. "He's tough."

"And Pablo didn't hurt me," added Della. "He told me that he was just taking me to a place where only Big Jim knew, and that I had nothing to fear. He wanted to trap Big Jim. He thought I was Big Jim's girl."

"I think Tex no want her," explained Pablo quickly. "I'm —— fool, I t'ink."

"Yuh sure are, Pablo," smiled Tex, throwing his arm around Della's shoulders. "You're a smart Injun; but there's some things yuh don't know much about. I'm goin' to marry her, Pablo. I'm goin' to do my dangest to get you out of trouble and then I'm goin' to hire Alice Spotted Horse to cook for us."

"Another thing," offered McHague hoarsely. "I happen to know that Big Jim palmed that thousand dollars and only left fifteen hundred in that envelope, Miss. When Crane failed to count it in the bank, it kinda soured his game. He had no way of provin' that Crane didn't take it. You can be crooked for a while, but you're crazy when yuh think that you can get away with it forever."

Alice Spotted Horse moved in closer to Tex, squinting at him curiously.

"You hire me for cook?" she asked. "I put much sody in biscuit and I kill Big Jim. I plenty bad Injun."

"I'll hide the soda and the rifle," said Tex seriously.

"Um-m-m!"

Alice Spotted Horse looked around at the grinning faces, squinting at each one. Then she rubbed her moccasined toe on the dirt floor and heaved a mighty sigh of relief—

"I be ——!"

Slim limped up to Tex and held out his good hand. For several moments they looked at each other seriously. Then a grin came to their faces and Slim said slowly:

"You know how I felt about it, pardner. Me and Bill Smith will kinda side-step and let old Tex have what belongs to him."

THEIR hands gripped tightly for a moment and Slim limped away. Della was looking at him as if she understood, and the other cowpunchers turned away to assist the sheriff in his work. Old Pancho nuzzled Tex's hand and walked stiffly to the door, where he turned and looked at Tex and Della, as much as to say—

"There's too many folks looking on."

"Yuh can take the two pinto horses," offered Slim. "I'll use one of the extra ones.

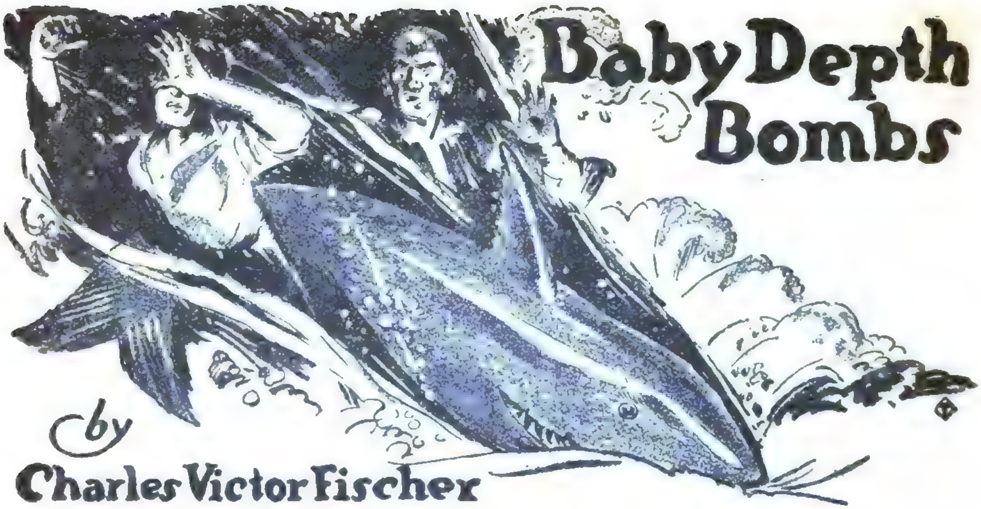
Tex nodded and they walked out of the door, going down the rocky slope, while ahead of them stalked old Pancho, the dog who was not fooled by a strange face. In the doorway of the cabin stood Pablo, the crippled half-breed, who, like the dog, recognized more than a face. He was grinning in spite of his wounds and what he must face in the future.

Alice Spotted Horse moved in beside him, squinting down the trail. Pablo looked at her closely and touched her on the arm with his uninjured hand.

"You all right," he said softly. "Bimeby I come to see you, Alice. Sheriff say I no get hung—mebbe. You no got Tucson Charley—I got nobody. You *sabe?*"

The big Indian woman turned her eyes from the trail and looked intently at the little half-breed. She did not understand at first. She was not very quick to grasp things. Then the ghost of a smile crossed her lips and she half-nodded an affirmative.

"I be ——," she said.



Baby Depth Bombs

by

Charles Victor Fischer

Author of "Over the Hump," "Snoutful, Gullets and Hawkeye," etc.

IT HAPPENED on the dizzy decks of a big scout cruiser. The *Rolling Lou,* they called her then. About two years or so later, when she was out laying depth-eggs on Billy's undersea vermin, they got to calling her the *Baby Lou*—not they of the undersea vermin, mind; only Davy Jones knows what they called her. Anyhow here, at the time of this tale, a Sunday afternoon in July some few years back, she was still the *Rolling Lou*—a great, long, gray thing of lean, lithe lines, with a towering concave bow like that of a destroyer, a short stretch of high forecastle that broke between her bridge and the foremost of her four tilting stacks, and a low, tapering after section.

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, seldom sees any Navy ships in July, as these rendezvous there in Winter only. The *Lou* had the whole bay—with its lofty, barren mountains to the east, its lowlands of brush and swamp to the west, and its few tufts of green islets to the north near the mouth of Caimaneria River—not to say a word of the sharks—had it all, the whole works, did the *Lou* to herself with her brood of five hundred tars.

She was standing by for a dash to Vera Cruz, Mexico, where a few factions were spitting venom at one another and might soon be spitting lead—the idea being to have a few hundred gobs and marines not too far away, "should things get horse-style." For American interests must be protected.

She was a goer, this *Lou.* That was her paramount duty—just running around. And ever was she moving. Never did her anchor sink deep enough in the mud to make it hard hoisting. For the *Lou* and her five hundred it was gallop, gallop, gallop over the ocean's dizzy hills and valleys—Mexico today, Haiti tomorrow, Panama next week. She was the veriest of sea ramblers. And she could, as her flatfooted brood used flatly and with chips on shoulders to assert, "get up and walk." In her engines was a thirty-three-knot throb.

But it *was* dizzy, insufferably dizzy, that afternoon. It was hot enough to fry eggs in the sun almost! Even with the awnings spread over all her upper decks, the tar in the *Lou's* deck seams was as soft as soup. It was Sunday, however, hence nothing to do in the way of drills or sailorizing, and nearly all the crew were "flemished down"—some asleep, some just day-dreaming.

Back on the quarter-deck the officer of the deck and the quartermaster yawned and paced slowly, heavily athwartships. A ragged Cuban, a bumboat man, carrying a large basket of fruits, cigarets, soft drinks, slouched about, getting a growl here, a scowl there, but now and then putting over a sale. Up forward, at the forecastle rail, a small group of sporting tars were making persistent efforts to hook a ten-foot shark that wouldn't be hooked.

"Baby Depth Bombs," copyright, 1924, by Charles Victor Fischer.

At the rail amidships, arms folded, stood the *Rolling Lou's* paymaster, or "Pay" Wills, as he was called. He was a youngster of medium height and build, with a goodly sweep of shoulders and an easy, athletic carriage. He was dark, almost swarthy, had curly brown hair and sea-blue eyes—a boyish, carefree face with nothing in the way of dark lines, hollows or forehead wrinkles to tell the tale of its owner's thirty years of battering and ramming upward.

Pay's attention was on the efforts of the shark-catchers up forward. The impulse to join them was strong within him. For be it known that Paymaster Wills had, not long since, been just common, ordinary "Happy" Wills, a gob whom all the other gobs liked, and who had twelve years of continuous service on the high seas to his credit.

He had to swallow the impulse, however; for he was an officer now and, cut as it would against the democratic grain in him, must swim in the channel of tradition and etiquette. Greater heads than he had concluded that too close an intimacy between those forward and those aft was not good for the service. Therefore he contented himself with looking on.

Either this shark had been hooked before and made a getaway, or had seen others hooked. He seemed to know that a piece of meat on the end of a line spelled danger. He declined to nibble. Each time the large chunk of meat was thrown out to him, he nosed up, nuzzled it, with his yellow-green cat-eyes leered at it, then, in the act of gulping it, disappointed his would-be captors by giving the water a slap with his tail and moving away.

A man stepped up to Pay and saluted.

"I've got a special-money requisition, sir."

Pay whirled, his smile of amusement displaced by a frown of annoyance. He looked the man up and down in glowering appraisal. He knew him only as a fireman named Roach—a rather old recruit, a man who, although well up in the thirties, had been in the Navy only a very short time. Pay noted that in one hand Roach held two slips of paper, a pay-check and a money requisition, and in the other two bottles of ginger ale, which Pay surmised he had just bought from the bumboat man.

"Special money!" Pay put his hands on his hips and cocked his head to one side belligerently. "What, on Sunday?"

The enlisted man nodded, returning the officer's glare with an unperturbed smile. He had strong, prominent features and hard, gray eyes that glinted shrewdly. He was big; tall, well-framed, husky.

"Why didn't you come around yesterday?" Pay pursued, his large eyes flashing indignation. "Do you realize that it's work to go down there and open that safe?"

"Yes, sir, I do," Roach answered promptly. "But I didn't know I'd need the money till this noon, sir. I'm sorry to have to trouble you, but this is an eleventh-hour development, sir."

Then the faint smile left Roach's face, and suddenly his eyes blazed.

"But the point is, sir, I've got to have it! I've got to make Guantanamo City this evening! It's a matter of life and death, sir!"

Roach paused, lowering his fiery eyes. When again he looked up his smile had returned. He held up the two bottles of ginger ale.

"I realized, sir, that I was pulling a goat-getter," he went on, "and thought I might partially square things with these. They're cold."

Ordinarily an enlisted man might as well slap an officer in the face as offer to set him up the drinks. But Pay Wills had been a gob for twelve years and an officer only a few months. Moreover, it was hot, and a bottle of cold ginger ale—or cold anything for that matter—didn't sound bad. There was no one in the pay-office just now. Why let such a frivolous thing as "caste" prevent him from swigging a cold bottle with a man who bore all the earmarks of a good sport?

"You see, sir," Roach continued, "I've just come from the executive officer. I told him I must have the money, and that I must make Guantanamo City this evening. He said all right, I can go. Also he signed this."

Roach held out the special-money requisition (an order from the executive officer to the paymaster to pay a man up to date, between pay-days), along with his pay-check. Pay let out a soft whistle, as he noted the amount written on the pay check—$256.00.

"All that?"

"Been letting my money ride, sir," Roach explained, and added with an ironical grin: "Thought I'd run up a stake. But what the ——"

He stopped, his eyes scowling at the distant mountain-tops.

Pay eyed him curiously.

“But how are you going to get up to Guantanamo City?” he queried.

“Why, I go up the river to Caimaneria in the bumboat.”

Roach yawned, pointing aft along the ship’s side to a small motorboat moored to the quarter-boom.

“The dago’ll take me to Caimaneria, and from there I’ll take the train to Guantanamo City.”

“In a hurry?”

“Oh, no,” Roach answered easily. “Plenty time. Just so I make the five o’clock train out of Caimaneria.”

Pay’s gaze wandered forward to the big shark, still unhooked, lying-to fifty feet from the ship’s side.

“There’s a foxy fish,” he mused. “He knows a line. Also seems to know that it’s Sunday and that they won’t shoot him. Got relatives, have you, down in this part of the world? Or friends?”

He turned, grinning.

“Or are you about to take a matrimonial dive?”

For which Pay received a look that he felt down to his toes. If he, Pay Wills, knew the A-B-C of eye-language, he was being told to mind his own business.

“The point is, sir,” was the big fireman’s unequivocal come-back, “I’ve got to take that money to Guantanamo City this evening. It’s a matter of life and death, sir!”

He uttered it straight out in a vibrant voice and backed it up with a fierce glare of his indomitable gray eyes. It struck Pay Wills in that instant that behind those blazing eyes was something bigger than coal-shovel lore. Moreover he noted that the fingers clutching the necks of those two bottles were white, smooth and tapering—the fingers of a bank president rather than those of a coal-heaver. But after that rebuff Pay was asking no further questions.

“All right, Roach,” he smiled. “Be at the pay-office in fifteen minutes. First I’ve got to go down to the sick-bay to see one of my gang. Darsey, the yeoman, is down from the heat, and I’m anxious to know how he’s getting along. I’ll be with you in fifteen minutes.”

With that Pay started forward.

“And try to keep those two bottles cold,” he laughed back over his shoulder.

SOMETHING vastly different from the generality of gobs in that fellow, Pay reflected, walking forward. What was a man of his age and apparent metal doing in the service? A thirty-five-year-old recruit—a coal-heaver——

Now emphatically this man was not a reformed boozer or dope-fiend, in the Navy to rehabilitate himself; there were will and force behind those hard, gray eyes. And in like manner Pay eliminated the “vamp” suggestion; it would take more than powder and paint and silk to vamp a man with so fine a forehead, powerful a jaw and shrewd, hard eyes to the gutter. Roach was no common clay, but big stuff. He fairly oozed big stuff.

But what was he doing in the Navy? That was what stumped Pay. What were those smooth white hands doing on the heavy ends of slice-bar and shovel?

“Might have been the ponies,” Pay mused. “Or possibly a misjudgment on a flier. Something like that. Gambled away a fortune. Woke up on the rocks, saw a recruiting-sign and, just as a fellow seeing a punching-bag, took a wallop at it.”

So ran Pay’s thoughts as he walked slowly forward.

“I’d be willing to bet that name Roach is phony,” he went on. “But whose business is that? As long as a man wasn’t a crook, and as long as he hits the ball, why should we worry about who or what he was? I like his cut at that.”

With which Pay entered the sick-bay.

PAY found his man Darsey deep in oblivion. In fact every patient in the sick-bay was wrapped in oblivion. Save for a few snores and the low hum of the fans, the large, airy compartment was as silent as a tomb. For a few seconds Pay’s amused eyes did an up-and-down zigzag from bunk to bunk—these built double-decker, ranging along both bulkheads. He was about to defer his visit and return aft, when the door leading forward to the dispensary—a small compartment adjoining, wherein the medicines, saws, knives and axes of surgery were kept—caught his eye, and merely for a casual look within he tiptoed in that direction. On the threshold he halted, stared a moment, then smiled broadly.

Here too was oblivion—but a different phase of it.

There was but one soul in the dispensary—a pharmacist's mate named Ivan Petrolavitch. And his was the oblivion of Richard the Miser.

Ivan sat at the glass-and-bottle-littered desk, his long, slightly hooked nose and sharp, uptilting chin over a large white crucible. In the crucible was a lump, about the size of a baseball, of flexible dough—or gum-like substance, bluish-gray in color. On this lump was centered all that was Ivan Petrolavitch, from nerve-ends to brain-centers. He was mixing, or kneading it; squeezing it through his long slender fingers, rolling and patting it in his palms, now stretching it out, as they pull candy, now squashing and balling it together again—as if not a soul existed within a thousand miles of him.

Pay watched him for several minutes, ahemmed his presence several times. Finally:

"What are you making, lad?" he blurted out. "Meat balls?"

Ivan looked around and up quickly. But it was many seconds before cognition dawned in his blinking, semi-conscious eyes—dark-brown, luminous, deep-sunk, those eyes; a dreamer's eyes, but within them the snappy glint of a keen, cunning intellect, and a disposition that could be anything but passive. His long nose curved downward, as he grinned at the question, almost meeting the point of his uptilting chin, so that the two, nose and chin, formed what might be likened to the wide-open claws of a lobster. But it was rather a grin of sarcasm than amusement.

"It might be of interest to you, sir," he replied with a touch of ill-concealed indignation, "to know that the constituent elements of this meat ball, as you call it, cost me over fifty dollars."

With that Ivan turned back to his task of squeezing and fingering the lump of soft, gray substance. Pay drew up a chair. Here was another character different from the generality. He somehow didn't belong; was out of his element. And now Pay recalled hearing Darsey speak of the red, fanatical anarchist—the "Dynamiter"—in the sick-bay. Pay was curious.

"Fifty dollars! What's in it lad—radium?"

The young Russian darted him a sly, sidelong glance and again closed nose and chin-points in a grin. Thin-featured, long-bodied, lean—he looked a hungry fox in a human body. He was composed of knuckles and shanks. The cuffs of his jumper fell short of his skinny wrists by eight inches, while about his meager body the jumper sagged wofully. His baggy trousers didn't reach his sharp shin-bones by a foot. He replied:

"For many years, sir, that has been an ever-echoing interrogation in the imperial palace at St. Petersburg. What was in that compound of Petrolavitch's?—my father, sir. How the Royal Rat of Russia, also his father, the former Royal Rat, and all their lesser rats have blinked and pondered and scratched over my father's meat ball! I tell you, sir, this meat ball has kept him sitting on a hot seat."

"Who, the Czar?"

"The Grand Skunk; yes, sir!"

Ivan's grin had vanished. Tense, rigid, underlip a-tremble, eyes wide with hate, he went on:

"I say off with all crown heads, sir! Down with them all! All czars, emperors, sultans, kings—down— But no——"

He hesitated, all teeth and eyes—artful, fanatical eyes.

"No, no; not down, but up, sir! Send them up! Straight up, sir!"

He stopped short. The paymaster's lips were quivering with suppressed humor.

"Blow 'em all up, eh?" he encouraged.

"Straight up, sir."

Ivan emphasized with a jerky nod.

"I say assemble all the crown heads of the world in some vast arena; seat them—the Grand Skunk in the center—on a platform with a few hundred tons of dynamite underneath. Then *spoof*, sir! Send them up, up and out—far out into the firmament, out beyond the force of gravity——"

"But wait, lad," Pay broke in. "Why do it all with one *spoof?* That's too much like spending a whole month's pay in one evening. Why not make the celebration last a while? How about tying 'em all to sky-rockets and sending them up one at a time?"

Ivan's long face betrayed a fleeting impulse to grin, but instantly darkened in a resentful frown.

"This is no material for burlesque humor, sir," he said in a low but incisive tone. "It is tragic, not ridiculous, the red and high-handed way in which these few degenerate families play football with the world.

Think, sir! Alexander the Third died in 1894. Up rises his son Nicholas the Second to proclaim himself God of the nation. Is this right, just, sir? By what manner of reasoning? Why should a soul be born to a throne? By whose almighty grace are the lives and destinies of a nation's millions entrusted in the hands of an unbirthed being?"

"Say, lad," Pay laughed, "I'd rather be a coal-heaver in this Navy than the Czar of Russia any day. That boy's chair is too warm for me. But why trouble your young head with the lives and destinies of Russia's masses? Why, boy, think of all the rope neckties the Alecks and the Nicks up there have handed out to men who tried to unseat them!"

Ivan's face brightened.

"You've read Russian history, sir?"

"Oh, I read a little of this, a little of that."

"You must have read of my father—Ivan Leo Nickolas Petrolavitch? No? Oh, surely! Russia's dynamic logician and philosopher, Nihilist, for many years a leader of the Will of the People? No? The master chemist, physicist, mathematician—the wizard of nitro-glycerin?"

Ivan paused, sighed, then tried again.

"The man who with his long toe-nails cheated the jackals of the Grand Skunk out of torturing him to death in Siberia?"

"Toe-nails!"

Pay drew a package of cigarets. Ivan's quick eyes noted the move.

"No, no, no, sir! Don't, don't light up, sir!"

Pay stared in dumb astonishment.

"Why, what's up, lad?"

"I've just told you, sir, that my father packed enough of this meat ball into his toe-nails to cheat the royal monkeys of Russia out of the pleasure of torturing him to death!"

"O-o-oh!" and Pay laughed, pocketing the cigarets. "It dawns!"

He pushed back his cap and knocked with his knuckles on his forehead.

"What would it do, lad—send the pair of us up through the bulkhead?"

"Well, sir—" Ivan chuckled—"I saw it used on one occasion in particular. In that instance it had that upward directional tendency."

He grinned broadly.

"The man, chair and all went straight up, sir, virtically. Nor was there much of detonation; merely a *spoof*. He was a traitor, this man, to one of my father's societies."

"I SAW it used on another occasion," Ivan continued after a long silence. "But then I was not yet five—too young to understand. Yet I remember vividly that thrilling moonlight night when my father blew up our palatial home in St. Petersburg. I tell you, sir, it was terrible but magnificent. I stood shivering at his side in a rickety shack near by when he closed the switch, thus rendering our house with its thirty or more of Cossacks a flying mass of splinters and arms and legs."

Ivan's bony shoulders shook convulsively with the recollection.

"You see, sir," he explained, sobering, "my father, in a newspaper he owned, *The Voice*, had breathed out of his turn. He had sung the praises of a certain martyr. Down came the heel.

" 'Seize him!' was the order.

"Hence the thirty or more Cossacks in our house that night.

"But little did those rats realize what a hornet's nest was the head of my father! We watched them, I repeat, sir, from a dilapidated shack near by. What with a white moon, stars, and the snow, it was a daylight night. They came, crept up to the house on their hands and knees and bellies, smashed in the windows and doors and piled into our house like a pack of voracious wolves."

Ivan held out the ball of gray gum.

"Several pounds of it, sir, disposed in small lumps about the house, each lump wrapped about a tiny spark-gap. All these spark-gaps were in the one circuit; that is, connected to the two wires that led to the switch in the shack near by, where my father and I were. For he was no closet theorist, my father; he not only foresaw, but prepared. He lived in tomorrow—and tomorrow's tomorrow. And when he closed that switch—which he did only after all the monkeys were inside—he blasted——"

Ivan paused, eyes rolling till nothing but the whites showed.

"Ah, well— But you may be sure, sir, there was nothing left to confiscate. Not so much as one whole monkey was left."

Here Ivan fell silent. His deft fingers

squeezed and kneaded the last few lumps out of the "meat ball." Then he put the crucible and explosive away in a drawer and turned to face Pay.

"I tell you, sir, *he who swallows a lighted bomb shall rise.*"

Pay scratched an ear.

"No doubt," he grinned. "But how did you make your getaway that night?"

"I have told you, sir—" Ivan frowned—"that my father lived in tomorrow's tomorrow. To such an ultra-mind as his the matter of our escape was as nothing. He had planned all that. Of course he lost about everything he owned. What few thousand rubles in currency he did manage to salvage was spent getting us across the border and to America.

"But the head of my father was an incubator of ideas. For him making money was as easy as gathering sea-shells. For many years we lived in a moderate apartment up-town in New York. There men came from all over to consult my father on scientific and political problems.

"Money! In great, unbelievable lump sums he made it—ten, twenty, fifty thousand dollars in one scoop, sir! We should today be millionaires in a mansion on Fifth Avenue, instead of he a heap of bones decomposing into Siberia's frozen soil, and I a bluejacket in the United States Navy."

And, looking at the long, thin face now with its somber, far-away eyes and drooping jaw, Pay Wills saw all the sad, black melancholy of suffering Russia. The next moment he was looking into the red, ferocious eyes and teeth of an animal at bay as Ivan flared up again.

"Selfish ones have declared my father a fool, sir. He was no such —— thing! He was a martyr. Others, the Czar's minions, themselves emissaries of ——, have declaimed him as a world destroyer, an exterminator of God! To the ignorant masses they shouted that Ivan Leo Nicholas Petrolavitch was seeking the dictatorship of Russia. I tell you, sir, that my father had no such —— notion in his great head! He sought only the emancipation of Russia, because and only because he loved his people.

"Personal ambition! Out of all the money he made my father hoarded nothing. Every dollar over our needs went to the *Cause.* Waking, sleeping, he lived one endeavor—to lift the wallowing masses up out of the slimy pit of ignorance and to exterminate those human cancers, those fat, sleek swinish rats that feed on the heart of Russia. That achieved, I know that my father would have been content to settle down to his science and philososphy. For I knew my father.

"Why shouldn't I know my father? I was with him all the time. He educated me himself. I never went to school. It was his conviction that the constraining process and tight-rein methods of the schoolroom crush and stunt originality."

Ivan now, after saturating his handkerchief with alcohol, began wiping his hands.

"Indeed, sir, in the fifteen years we lived in New York my father kept two czars, Alexander the Third and Nicholas the Second, sitting on hot seats. It was my father's great mind that motivated most of the attempts on their rotten lives—abortive attempts, true, but occurring often enough to keep them scratching."

Ivan walked over to a port-hole and threw his handkerchief out. His long face now wore the radiant look of a boy about to place a tack on his stepfather's chair.

"He who swallows a lighted bomb shall rise," he iterated. "These sharks, sir——"

"But you said your father died in Siberia—committed suicide—cheated them out of torturing him to death——"

"Through the medium of his long toe-nails; yes, sir. That was only two years ago. You see, sir, he returned to St. Petersburg. He had a radio-controlled device that had taken him many years to perfect; with this he purposed testing that upward directional tendency of his explosive—on the palace.

"And in all his brilliant career, sir, that was my father's only slip. Strictly it wasn't a slip. We learned later that a traitor had divulged things.

"Anyhow my father was arrested in St. Petersburg, tried for conspiracy and sentenced to life imprisonment in Siberia. There they tried to torture his secret out of him. I learned long afterward how one night he requested a match from his guard to pick his toe-nails with; how three minutes after it was given him—*spoof*, sir!

"Later we learned who the traitor was. I witnessed his removal. It was highly spectacular, sir. The man rose, without leaving his chair, crash against the ceiling. Properly handled, that is the most wonderful virtue of my father's compound—it's power can be concentrated. Properly handled, we can blow up a man, in a room, with scarcely any lateral pressure, that is, displacement of other objects than those above it; so that a goodly audience may with impunity sit in and enjoy the ceremony."

PAY suddenly jumped to his feet as if pricked with a pin.

"By George, lad!" he laughed. "You got me so interested that I forgot there's a fellow with a special requisition waiting for me. Big fireman named Roach. Told him I'd meet him in fifteen minutes."

He started for the door.

"But say, one thing more. What the blazes are you doing with that meat ball?"

Ivan had lighted a Cuban cigaret. He held it before him between thumb and forefinger, regarding it curiously.

"These Cuban cigarets, sir—they burn like rotten rags. Light one and——"

"Uh-huh. But what are you doing——"

"—begin a conversation, and suddenly you burn your fingers."

"But what are you doing with that meat ball? Figuring on blowing up my safe?"

Pay grinned, adding:

"Be worth your while, at that. There's seventy thousand dollars in it."

Ivan frowned in disdain.

"These sharks, sir—they're so hard to catch. They seem to apprehend the line. They'll scoff anything thrown to them, just so there is no line attached to it."

Pay took another step toward the door.

"Yes; they're foxy sharks. But I've got to get, lad."

"Very good," Ivan pursued. "You, sir, no doubt have seen many sharks caught—hooked, shot, harpooned——"

"Yes, and dynamited."

"But from without, sir; that is, stunned by concussion. Have you ever seen one blown up from within, sir? Have you ever seen, or heard of, a shark being fed a lighted bomb?"

Again Pay scratched an ear.

"I don't get you. Say, lad, I've got to get aft and pay that fellow Roach."

"On experiment," Ivan went on heartlessly, holding out the already half-burned cigaret, "I've found that one of these cigarets will retain its fire inside of a bottle, corked up, very nearly to its bitter end. I tried it first with small bottles, but it failed; the cigaret burned only a half-inch or so then went out. But inside a pint bottle, sir, it will burn for almost its entire length."

Ivan flipped the cigaret out through the port-hole, then, rubbing his hands, continued.

"These sharks, sir—they turn up their noses at a chunk of meat on the end of a line. Very well, then we'll feed Sir Shark a piece of meat without any line attached. First we'll make a slit, a pocket, in the meat large enough for a pint bottle. After inserting the bottle in this pocket, we take one of these Cuban cigarets, light it, then about its other end wrap a thin slab of the meat ball—about as much as one could pack into his toe-nails. Now we have a bomb, sir, with detonator attached. This we drop into the bottle, quickly, for these Cuban cigarets burn fast. Then press in the cork. Next a hasty stitch in the lips of the pocket with sail needle and twine, to hold the bottle in, a knot—it can all be done in a second, sir. Finally:

" 'Gangway! I bear Sir Shark's Sunday dinner! Stuffed meat.' "

Pay eyed him narrowly for a few moments.

"Yes, that's lots of fun, all right. But say, do you mean to tell me that you spent fifty dollars for the mere fun of blowing a few sharks inside out? Why, all the sharks in the bay are not worth——"

"But, sir—" Ivan danced over to the door, blocking Pay's exit—"I'll be demonstrating my father's wonderful explosive; showing the meat ball in action. I am the only man living who knows the secret of this compound. I want to sell this secret, sir, to the United States Navy—or give it in exchange, rather, for an appointment to Annapolis."

Pay's eyes roved up and down over the long, lean figure.

"Oh, I know, sir," Ivan hastened to add. " 'Built like an eel,' you say. Very well, then; if I don't measure up to the physical requirements of Annapolis, I'll take a commission outright with duty, say, in the Bureau of Standards."

"Why, sure."

Pay wanted out.

"But say, lad, I've got to get aft and pay a man."

PAY found the big fireman Roach seated on a ditty-box at the pay-office door. In a bucket of water, on deck before him, were the same two bottles of ginger ale.

"By George, man, I never meant to keep you so long."

Pay fumbled with his keys.

"But things just so happened that— How about it? Will you be able to make your train?"

Roach had stood up, the two bottles in hand.

"Plenty time, sir," he answered. "The Cuban says he can make Caimaneria in two hours. I've tried to keep these two bottles cold."

Pay was too full of the whimsical, fanatical Russian to observe that Roach's lips twitched and that it cost him an effort of will to control his voice. Pay unlocked the door. Roach followed him into the pay-office—a room fifteen by thirty, with desks and typewriters all about, and a huge safe in one corner. Roach set the two bottles on a desk, then stepped back to the door.

"Better lock it, eh?"

Roach drew the bunch of keys from the outside of the lock and closed the door. He was smiling handsomely. There was confidence, assurance in his tone and movements. He pointed to the two bottles.

"It wouldn't look good—for you, sir. I haven't been in the service long, but I know that much. We might meet some time ashore, in civilian clothes, and drink together as men drink, without overstepping caste or custom. But here aboard, in uniform, you're an officer and I'm an enlisted man. So we'll just lock this door."

The man was a magnet. His low, compelling tones, his unwavering gray eyes, the strength and certitude of him drew Pay's admiration in a way he couldn't have defined. The slight nervous twitching of lips Roach had betrayed a minute before, outside, was gone. He uncorked the bottles with steady, efficient hands, and smiled grandly while doing it.

They said: "Here's how," "My regards," and tilted bottles.

"Anything cold goes big on a day like this," Pay said after a long pull.

Roach nodded. Then again they tilted bottles and drained them.

Pay took Roach's pay-check and smoothed it out flat on the desk, then turned to the huge safe in the corner.

"You know," he laughed, "a man runs across some rare types in this Navy. And the queer part of it is you've never seen the last of them. I've been here nearly thirteen years—since I was seventeen. An hour ago I'd have bet my commission—all I've got—to a Chinese penny that no man could spring anything new on me in the way of an American bluejacket. I thought I'd seen every possible compound of a flatfoot. But I know better now. Ivan Petrolavitch——"

Pay broke into a laugh and dropped on one knee before the safe.

"Oh, yes, the Dynamiter," said Roach while Pay was working the combination. "He's a red one, all right. Yes, I imagine you have seen some rare birds in thirteen years. This Navy is a great melting-pot, sir."

"Not what it used to be," Pay grunted, "before we had the finger-print system."

He paused a few seconds, his attention on the combination.

"We used to get crooks, cutthroats. But nowadays a runaway convict is only acting the ostrich in coming into the Navy."

"And yet," said Roach, "it's only about two years ago that one of the most notorious crooks, after making a getaway from a Western penitentiary, covered his tracks by enlisting in the Navy at 'Frisco. You've probably read of Dan Coonsby?"

Pay stood up, swinging the safe door open. He passed a hand cross his eyes, as if the stooping dizzied him.

"Coonsby? Who, the safe-cracker? He shipped in the Navy?"

"That same bird. He fooled 'em all around, sir. They can't figure yet how he got out of the pen. Seemed like he put over a fourth-dimension stunt—just wished himself out.

"He came near putting his foot in it at that. He shipped as just plain ordinary Jim Jones, down-and-outer. The joker was, he'd been in the Navy before—oh, ten, twelve years before. He got through O. K.—covered up his getaway. But a month after he shipped, on a gunboat lying off San Diego, one of the old-timers got it into his head that Jim Jones looked a whole lot like a certain kid he'd used to know years before—a kid that had deserted from one of the old packets at Boston after cleaning out every ditty-box on the ship— Why, what's the trouble, sir?"

Pay shook his head, blinked his eyes. He was leaning against the open door of the safe.

"Search me," he grinned. "Guess stooping over made my head swim. Dizzy as —— there for a moment. Heat, I guess. Give me those keys, will you?"

Roach reached out for the bunch of keys hanging from the door lock. Pay fumbled clumsily with them a few moments, finally selecting one. This, after two wild jabs, he inserted in the lock of one of the safe's inner doors. He turned.

"Coonsby?"

Pay was now a little unsteady on his feet. Again he passed a hand across his eyes.

"But how did they find out Jones was Coonsby?" he went on thickly. "You say old-timer knew Jones—kid robbed everybody's ditty-box—deserted—Boston."

He shook his head.

"Say, what the blazes is the matter with me?"

Roach reached out to support him. Pay pushed the hand away. He drew himself up with a jerk, with an effort of will steadied himself. In five seconds he was again reeling.

"How they find out Jones—Coonsby—escaped convict?"

Roach waited, smiling, for several seconds. Then:

"Why, they never found out, sir. This Jones, Coonsby, never gave that old-timer a chance to report that he was the kid deserter of years before."

He paused, still smiling, as if it gave him pleasure to keep the paymaster guessing. Pay now had to put out a hand to support himself against the desk.

"No? How come?"

"Why——"

Roach hesitated, eyeing him shrewdly, for several seconds more. Finally:

"Jones—Coonsby—choked that old-timer before he got a chance to squeal. That old-timer, sir, is still among the missing—disappeared, unaccounted for. At the rail one dark night Jones strangled him till he couldn't squawk, then dropped him over the side—at ebb tide."

Pay suddenly commenced tottering drunkenly. His head fell this way and that. His eyes were blinking, his mouth twitching.

He was fast losing stability. Something was wrong, rotten. Then he realized that the safe was wide open, with seventy thousand dollars therein.

Rocking, swaying, that one thought holding him up, Pay gathered himself for the supreme effort, then lurched for the safe door. But he didn't reach it. He was lifted clear of the deck—hurled. With a *bang!* he crashed in a corner.

Countless faces, all of them alike, went whirling about him as he lay there on his back, filling all space before his swimming vision. They were monstrous, hideous. They leered, grinned at him. Roach was no longer a human magnet. He was a wolf.

"So you see, Mr. Officer, Jones was the both of them—Coonsby and the kid deserter. Pretty good, eh—hiding behind the nation's guns. But Jones only stayed long enough to cover Coonsby's getaway from the pen. He deserted for the second time. And then, about two months ago, at New York, he shipped for the third time—under the name of Roach. See?"

INDEED Pay saw. He saw himself the fly in the web. Moreover he saw himself the laughing-stock of the Atlantic Fleet—of the Navy! The baby paymaster who struggled over twelve years for his rank, then threw it away in fifteen minutes by being too good a fellow!

But he saw too late. For strive as he would to throw off the sense-deadening, crushing spell, the effort was a sickening futility. He lay there like a stone. His whole body seemed cemented to the deck. He could move neither hands nor feet.

Some vague sensation remained in his hands; they felt large as hams, and seemed without fingers. Below the knees he was numb with a numbness that was fast moving upward. He saw Roaches, myriad Roaches, grinning down on him, all their teeth moving at once as they roared:

"All right, Mr. Officer—that's you. The chances are you'll never come out of this—after downing that whole bottle. But if you're lucky—if they should happen to get the pump on you in time—tell 'em Dan Coonsby handed the Navy this jolt.

"Even if they do pump you in time, you won't snap in time to get me. By the time you're able to tell things Dan Coonsby'll be somewhere out in the wild mountains of Cuba. You asked me up on deck a while ago have I got friends down here. I sure have."

He broke into a wild laugh.

"The guns of the nation!" he flouted. "Say, Mr. Officer, did you ever know that the best guarded places are the easiest to crack?"

That was the last Pay heard. Under the appalling realization of having been taken in for seventy thousand dollars of the government's money, and damning himself therefor as the world's champion jackass, he swept into blackness.

* * *

THERE was nothing suspicious in Roach's attitude when he stepped out of the pay-office. If there had been it would have passed unnoticed, as only two men were in that compartment and these busy writing letters on ditty-boxes. Closing the door, he stood for a few seconds with his back to it, one hand behind him, apparently on the knob but actually inserting and turning the key. A coal-heaver locking the pay-office door would have aroused curiosity. And Dan Coonsby was too profound a master of crime lore to overlook such an important detail.

His game was all but won. It hadn't been so easy a game for Roach as might appear. During the two months he had been in the Navy Roach had been in hell. Not the heat and toil of the fire-room—although that, to his parasitic nature, must have been loathsome. But that was not the bug in his brain. It was that constant apprehension of the finger-print experts in Washington discovering that Roach was Jones, the deserter of the west coast. That might mean a year or eighteen months in a naval prison; and once in prison, any prison, there would follow a further comparing of finger-prints, which must inevitably lead to the further discovery that Jones was Dan Coonsby. That meant back to the penitentiary, that inferno wherein he had served but one year on a fifteen-year term.

All this Coonsby had weighed, threshed out, that night months before in Havana, when he and Don Perez, a notorious Cuban, as black with crime as Coonsby himself was, had concerted the game. It was a desperate game, and Coonsby recognized its perils. But the stake was big, and Perez, far-seeing, shrewd, eloquent, had fired the American felon's imagination till his keener judgment broke down.

Playing on the wolf in Coonsby's nature, Perez had unfolded the project of organizing a crooked lottery in Cuba. With unerring mathematics and eloquence he had convinced Coonsby that they could become millionaires in one year. They could then fit out a yacht and bid the world farewell; sail to the far corners, beyond Law's reach.

But it would take capital; much money would be required for secret propaganda, agent work—fifty thousand dollars, Perez calculated. One big haul and they could launch the project.

Thus it was that Coonsby had taken this long chance. Robbing a Navy pay-office had long been a germ in his germ-filled brain. He went to New York and enlisted for the third time. Then he contrived to get transferred to the *Rolling Lou*, knowing that this ship frequently put in at Guantanamo Bay, the logical place to put it across. During all this time he had kept in touch with Perez.

* * *

THE big trick was across, and Roach the fireman was a happy tar. Sixty-some thousand dollars was strapped round his body beneath his loose-fitting white jumper, all packed away neatly in a broad money-belt so that he showed no bulges.

It was all over but the running. All that remained was to run up the river a way—he and Perez, the bumboat man—sink the boat, swim ashore, then strike out to the eastward for Don Perez' mountain lair. And there they would rest a while, laying plans for their great project.

Roach was too seasoned a crook to let the elation of near achievement kill achievement. He was always acock. He walked aft quickly, as moves a man with somewhere to go, but without nervous haste. His stride, carriage and expression were those of a tar going on liberty, without a worry in the world. Just that. Arriving on the quarter-deck, he saluted the officer of the deck, stated that he had special liberty from the executive officer and requested permission to leave the ship.

The officer of the deck gave him an up-and-down eye inspection for clean, regulation clothes, shined shoes, cut hair, then queried—

"How are you going up, Roach?"

Roach pointed across the deck to the ragged Cuban bumboat man, Don Perez, waiting for him near the port gangway.

The officer nodded; said—

"Go to it."

And two of the most notorious rats that ever gnawed worry into two nations stepped down the *Rolling Lou's* gangway with all of the *Rolling Lou's* money but the small change—and this within arm's reach of five hundred of the nation's husky defenders. The engine sputtered, and they were off.

The ship lay pointing west with her starboard side toward the mouth of Caimeneria River. The crooks in the boat were on the ship's port side; that is, with the ship between them and the river. From the after gangway of a ship of the *Lou's* great length the shortest way would have been around her stern. So thought Perez, at the tiller, but Coonsby checked him in the act of putting it hard over.

"Run up around the bow," he directed.

Perez nodded. They held straight ahead, running parallel with the ship.

Coonsby's only apparent reason for doing this was that he wanted to vaunt himself. For he was a spotlight slave. Devoid of its notoriety, the game would have held but half the spice for Dan Coonsby. He had never turned a trick without leaving his card. He wanted to see his name in the papers next day. As witness his braggadocio ten minutes before in the pay-office.

As the boat ran forward along the ship's side, Coonsby turned a handsome smile upward at the gobs ranged along the rail. It was a sixty-some thousand dollar smile. Withal it was a farewell smile, and one that Coonsby wanted them all to remember.

The shame of it was, not a man along that rail was paying him any attention. He smiled and smiled, but every pair of eyes was straining forward. Every face wore a grin, and every mouth was open. Yet Coonsby smiled upward.

The launch gathered speed. Now she was amidships, now a little abaft of the bridge. Still not one of that long row of faces turned to look down. Coonsby frowned and looked forward.

High up on the forecastle he saw Ivan Petrolavitch, perched on the rail like a chicken on a fence. Neck stretching, the Russian lad was leaning far outboard, but by some miracle sticking to his perch. His long, thin face was tense, his eager, expectant eyes fixed on something in the water.

Coonsby didn't know that Ivan had just hurled a chunk of loaded meat, a bomb, to a fifteen-foot shark. A fin showed above the surface fifty feet ahead of the boat, but Coonsby thought nothing of that. The fin moved swiftly, a distance of fifteen feet in toward the ship. Coonsby thought the shark was getting out of the way—giving the boat gangway.

What the shark did in that moment was to swoop in and scoff down Ivan's chunk of meat containing the bottled bomb.

A great many things can happen in a very few seconds.

Coonsby heard a yell from the forecastle and looked up. Perched up there on the rail, Ivan was a very pinwheel of arms.

"Get out! Get away! Swing off!" he shouted.

And the gang crowding the rail took it up.

There wasn't time. At that moment the big shark suddenly became possessed with the notion that he was a flying-fish. Ten feet ahead of the boat, with a mighty heave he rose out of the water. For a moment his great mass of green wiggled in the sunshine. And just as he tumbled back into the water, the boat rammed him head on.

As Ivan said to Pay, "Whosoever swallows a lighted bomb shall rise," so it was. As the boat struck him Sir Shark rose again, wiggling like a snake. What shark wouldn't wiggle after having his entrails blown to pulp? He rose, boosting the forward end of the boat skyward. Like a rearing bronco the boat stood for a moment on her stern end, then tumbled back, flopped over on her side, swamped, dumping the two human rats into the water.

It was the most spectacular of shark antics ever witnessed from the *Rolling Lou's* rails. Three sharks in a battle royal, the water surging and tumbling about them, all jumbled in a seething confusion of arms and legs, fins and tail and a great wiggling mass of glistening white and green. Now and then a head bobbed up out of the boiling swirl. It looked like a big pot of stew. Young mountains of water rose out of the turmoil and went racing away in concentric circles, pounding wave on wave against the ship's side.

A shark dies hard. Even after hauling one aboard it takes many blows of the ax to kill him—and then he isn't dead. He keeps right on thrashing his life out inch by inch and slashing anything he can sink his teeth into.

The water turned crimson. With both ends of him that shark was busy. With his tail he lashed and slapped at the water. With his teeth he slashed and chopped, bit and tore off chunks of human meat and cloth, crunched bone. They had as much chance as would two rats with a bulldog. It was a very whirlpool of gore, in the center of which two mangled human beings battled for life.

Only one of the *Lou's* steam launches was in the water, moored to the boom on the other, starboard, side of the ship. By the time she got around, one human head had disappeared. The coxswain and the engineman, working together, wedged their launch's nose between shark and man. They hauled Roach aboard—or what was left of him.

* * *

IT WAS dark when Pay awoke. He lay there for a long time before ideas commenced to form. He felt no inclination to think. There was something pleasurable in this numbness that mental effort seemed to break down. So he lay there, striving not to strive. Nothing harder. Images would come. And once they began coming they continued coming faster and faster. But strangely the only part of him that functioned at all was his brain. The rest of him was paralyzed. He was unable to move.

He realized, remembered. The mad crook's words were pounding in his brain. The pump! the pump! He must get to the sick-bay and be pumped out! He was full of poison! But he was unable to move!

He didn't want to die, here in the pay-office! He didn't want to die anywhere! At all! Life was too good, and he was too young! It wasn't his time! But he was full of poison, and unable to move!

He tried to shout, but failed monstrously. He couldn't will his lungs to movement. Again and again he tried. Finally he succeeded—but miserably. A feeble groan was his very best.

That groan was enough. It brought some one. A face was bending over him. And now he became aware of dim light about him. He heard:

"Oh, Wills? Awake? Oh Pay. This is 'Medico.' "

The doctor! Pay groaned again. And then, putting forth all he had, he muttered:

"Pup-pump—pup-poison! Dud-doc, I'm ful-full poison!"

The doctor laughed softly.

"Oh, no, you're not, Pay. We pumped you out hours ago. Just take it easy. Everything's all right, Pay. We got back the money; it's back in the safe. Everything's all right. You're in your own room, in your own bunk. I'm anchored right here alongside of you, old boy, and you're coming through with flying colors.

"Don't worry. Don't try. Don't anything. The crook is up in the sick-bay giving his last few kicks. Everything is all right. Just sleep it off.

"We got you in time. When we found all that money on the crook, Petrolavitch remembered you saying you were going aft to pay that same fellow. Great lad, that Petrolavitch. Terrible name, though."

After a long silence Pay got out another word—

"How?"

Medico chuckled.

"The crook? Why, young Petrolavitch blew him up."

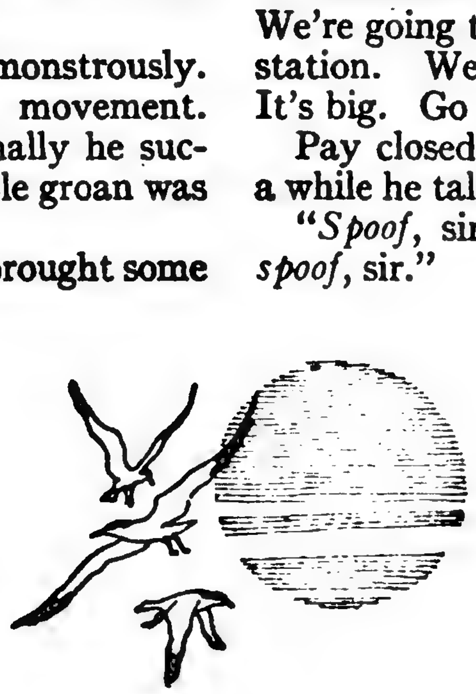
The ashen face he looked into commenced to grin.

"Sus-some—that—*sp-poof* stuff?"

"Yes. He killed three sharks with one bomb. He's a wizard, that kid. The whole wardroom is wild about him. They've got him back there pumping him with questions. We're going to send him to an experimental station. We want that explosive of his. It's big. Go to sleep, Pay."

Pay closed his eyes. Sleep came. After a while he talked in his sleep. He said:

"*Spoof*, sir. No detonation. Merely a *spoof*, sir."



The Bobo

A Complete Novelette

by

Captain Mansfield

OUT of his old world rode Innocente Candido, his world that was a small plot of sodden ground, kept sodden by much rain, and the shade of lofty coconut palms, a smaller nipa shack, and a section of the Calle Padre Francisco Xavier.

Out of this immensity rode the youth like a knight of old, in search of adventure. His radiant trappings were an old cotton shirt, and the wide brim of an ancient straw hat. The crown of the hat, saturated with coconut oil from its former owner's head, had long since been eaten by the family pig. The bosom of his sleeveless shirt bore the heraldic device—

SPERRY'S XXX FLOUR

Innocente was a Christian Filipino. To account for his presence among the Mohammedan Moros on a small island in the Sulu Sea, tradition had it that his forebears were captured in Cebu by raiding Moros, taken to Sulu land and sold into slavery.

In the troublesome times that followed the advent of the *Americanos*, when slavery among the Moros was tabu, Innocente's father found that he had to shift for himself, and made a poor job of it.

Innocente was an adventurous youngster. He would climb the tall coconut-trees that, contrary to Moro custom, had been tapped for tuba, and get the bamboo pipe of tuba for his ever thirsty father.

He was wise in the lore of the cock-pit. He would turn a fighting-cock on its back and study the markings on its up-turned feet, then, tossing the bird in the air to watch its wing-power, could give expert advice on the rooster's fighting points. And the land crabs, whose big claws could shear off a finger or thumb! *Carramba!* What sport to hold an infuriated crab within reach of a skeleton dog's tail! Always the tail would be shorn before the dog ran himself to death. Wonderful was the strength of the land crab's claw, and marvelous the vitality and speed of the skeleton dogs.

But his greatest sport was to ride the family carabao out to the buffalo wallows. Innocente's elder brother usually held this sinecure, but now the brother was down with the fever, so Innocente was given the coveted position.

His mother hoisted him on top of the big beast and put the grass driving-rope in his little fist. Then with the admonition to beware of all Moro children and start for home when the sun was over the Mountain of Tears, she made the sign of the cross over him and gave Aguinaldo, the carabao, a resounding slap.

Aguinaldo seemed to awaken. At least he opened his eyes, and with the small boy on his back greeting his confederates of the street with supercilious hauteur, entered the Calle Francisco Xavier. There the boy waved a joyous greeting to Papa Candido, his father, who was on his daily pilgrimage to the cock-pit, with his favorite fighting-cock snuggled on his arm.

The Calle Francisco Xavier was a very queer street. It began where the imagination placed it, growing more defined as it reached the alcalde's house where was the sign that bore its name.

From there, after wandering good-naturedly from house to house, it ended at the rice paddies which formed a buffer state between the ever absorbing jungle and the small *barrio* or village.

The rice-paddy end of the street was Innocente's first port of call. There the

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"*The Bobo*," *copyright, 1924, by S. A. Mansfield.*

black mud was especially soft, sticky and inviting to carabaos. Aguinaldo had his own special wallow. Into this hole he sank to rest like a scuttled ship, leaving the tip of his nose and two wicked-looking black eyes exposed. An oblong section of hairless, blue-black hide also remained above the surface. On this warm spot of carabao—a small island in a small sea of mud—sat Innocente with his short, chubby legs under him like a tailor.

For a while he hurled answering curses at the big, white carabao birds that were perched on the backs of other water buffalos near him, greedily eating flies and ticks. Then this sport palled, and as Aguinaldo had his eyes closed while he contentedly chewed his cud, Innocente closed his.

He awakened, his little heart going like a trip-hammer, at the sound of frenzied screams. He saw fire and smoke in his *barrio*.

In the act of pounding Aguinaldo awake and on his feet, he became as motionless as a bronze statue; then with eyes big with fear he peeped under the wide hat-brim at a strange Moro who was regarding him malevolently.

The Moro, breathing hard, stood at the edge of the buffalo wallow. He was naked save for a pair of wide, pink, bamboo-silk trousers. His yellow torso glistened with sweat and oil. His head was shaved to the smoothness of a billiard ball. His teeth, discolored by betel nut, were filed down to two horizontal lines of black stubs. He was smeared and streaked with blood.

"*Hola! Niño Christiano!*" he snarled. "Come here and be the third offering of your family. There's luck in the number."

With that, and as poor little Innocente sat frozen to the carabao, the Moro pulled his bloody fighting bolo from its scabbard. He drew his thumb delicately along its keen edge and suddenly lunged at the boy.

Innocente shrank from the blade as the carabao snorted loudly and hove its hind quarters up to regain his feet. At the sudden upheaval the boy lost his balance and slid off into the mud. For a moment he was buffeted by the animal's legs as it floundered about, but fortunately he was not stepped on. Then the commotion subsided; and when his lungs were on the point of bursting for lack of air Innocente slowly thrust his head up. Cautiously he wiped the mud from his eyes, and, as motionless as a baby crocodile, he looked for the Moro.

The man was lying on his back where the carabao had knocked him. He was pressing a deep gash in his cheek where one of the animal's horns had entered and torn out his right eye. In the background the carabao, snorting with rage and pain, was streaking it for home, with the Moro's fighting bolo waving from his shoulder.

One long, delicious breath of air and Innocente's head sank under again. When he looked the second time the Moro was crossing the rice paddy in the direction of the jungle. When he had disappeared the youngster scrambled out of the mud-hole and hurried to the *barrio* where the frenzied screams and smoke were still reaching the skies, to what had been his home.

Innocente was so dazed by his own experience with the Moro and by the sight of the charred and boloed remains of his mother and brother when he arrived at his burning home, that he could not talk—could not answer the questions his startling appearance caused. When he could speak and his first burst of childish grief was over, some inner prompting bade him keep his adventure to himself.

As time passed and he listened to his father magnify the one Moro who committed the horrible deed into a gang of *mundos* or outlaws, and the heroic fight that he put up in defense of his family—be it recorded that his father was at his usual haunt, the cock-pit, and so escaped the massacre—the boy would hold his peace and glory in the fact that he of all mankind knew the murderer—had escaped from his very clutches. He began to crave that it would ever be a secret until he and not the Constabulary would have the supreme satisfaction of revenge.

Then on a hot afternoon, while the *barrio* siestaed, a Coast Guard steamer anchored off the beach. The long blast from her steam whistle sent into the treetops a troop of monkeys that were digging clams, a flock of bright-green parrots screeching inland, and drew the people of the *barrio* sleepily from their nipa houses.

Innocente was first of the small group assembled when the bow of the steamer's launch grated on the sandy beach.

"*Americano!*" exclaimed the boy in awed tones as a young lieutenant of the Constabulary jumped from the boat, followed by two of his troopers. After greetings the old alcalde, master of ceremonies, took charge of the lieutenant and his men.

Innocente was the picture of disconsolation.

"*Carramba!*" he swore bitterly. "They'll catch my one-eyed Moro and hang him."

THE investigation was held in the alcalde's house and brought out startling facts. The murderer was a Yacan from the island of Basilan. He was a Moro from Jolo. He was a Samal sea-gipsy. He was a giant of a man. He was short and squat. There was one man who committed the murders. There were a dozen.

"Shut up!" roared the lieutenant finally, grabbing his hair.

In a moment he went on in calmer tones as he picked a murderous-looking knife off the alcalde's table:

"You swear that this is the bolo they tried to kill your carabao with? The one you took out of the animal's shoulder?"

"*Sí, señor!*"

It was Innocente's father who was getting the third degree, and his testimony was so flagrantly contradictory that the lieutenant was filled with indignation.

"*Sí, señor!*" reiterated the old man, his face streaming with sweat. "With my own hands I plucked it out."

The incongruous sound of laughter, spontaneous as a lark's song, rang out in the small house. Innocente was enjoying himself. The real bolo was safely hidden under the altar of the good *padre's* small church. True, the ancient alcalde had seized it as evidence for the Constabulary; but Innocente had traded a rusty old working-bolo for it while the alcalde and his household slept. The alcalde was almost blind and could not see the difference between the working-tool and the fighting-bolo with its gorgeous inlaid work of shining silver and gold and mother of pearl. As for his father! His father was full of tuba all the time and wouldn't know a working-bolo if he saw one. Thus reasoned Innocente. The world was looking brighter, and he laughed.

"Silence!" snapped the lieutenant.

He looked keenly at the boy until the frown changed to a smile. Then, addressing one of his troopers he said tersely—

"Put that young fool out!"

So Innocente was led ignominiously by the ear, like a pig, to the porch. There he was lifted by the hands, lowered and dropped to the ground. He lost none of the proceedings of the investigation, however. When the grinning trooper turned his back, Innocente climbed the notched log that did for steps back to the porch, where he lay on his stomach with his friend, the alcalde's dog.

He listened intently. His father was still under fire.

"Candido," the lieutenant, young in years but old in Moro warfare, was saying, "you are one unholy liar. No Moro would wear that bolo on a bet, much less use it."

Candido seemed to shrink within himself like a hermit crab with an oversized shell, while he looked yearningly at a bamboo pipe of tuba hanging to a rafter over the alcalde's head.

"And you say nothing else was stolen?"

The lieutenant was looking at the alcalde now.

"No, *señor!*"

"Well, that eliminates robbery as a motive. And it was not a case of *mangayao*—Moro revenge—no Moro held a grudge against the Candido family?"

"None known, *señor.*"

"That puts revenge out of the running as a motive. And it was not a case of *Juramentado*—the die-fighting suicide of a Moro, or he would have stayed and fought to a finish."

The lieutenant was silent a moment, drumming on the table with his fingers. Then—

"You know of Moro Angel, over on Bolipongpong Island?" he asked.

The alcalde rolled his eyes and crossed himself piously.

Innocente, from his vantage ground on the porch, pricked up his ears.

"Bolipongpong Island," he mused. "Now where can that be? On the other side of the world, no?"

Had he but known it he could have climbed the Mountain of Tears and seen it on the horizon.

"It's my opinion," continued the lieutenant, "that the outlaw Angel has a recruit—a new member in his band of *mundos.* I have it on good authority that there must be a price on a man's head before he is accepted by the canny Angel. What would be safer and easier than to chop up a woman and a boy? If they are Christians, so much the better. He not only is eligible to the outlaw band, but earns the approbation of the Prophet as well."

As time rolled on Innocente's desire for vengeance grew until it became an obsession. He quit playing with the other boys of the *barrio* and sought the company of men. Where two or more men gathered together there would be Innocente, listening eagerly.

His singleness of purpose brought the men's wrath on him. As he persisted, the wrath grew into a combination of suspicion and aversion. While not yet credited with possessing the evil eye, the people of the *barrio* would finger their *anting antings*, or charms, when he was present. He *was* queer.

Yet for all his labors he had not a clue to the murderer's identity. The people would not talk of the massacre in his presence.

Came another misfortune to the *barrio*. One night a big crocodile got into their fish corral and demolished the structure before it escaped. It was a serious blow, as the people had no fish to eat with their rice or taro until the corral was rebuilt.

Innocente it was who reported the disaster. They called him a witness of misfortune—a cause of bad luck.

Then a Moro from a neighboring *barrio* brought a canoe-load of fish to sell. Innocente, as usual, was on hand.

"What news bring you from Ballywassan, friend?" asked the boy.

"The monkeys put a crocodile in your fish corral," answered the Moro with a whimsical grin.

"Ho! That's not news to me. You told them to do it."

The man from Ballywassan eyed him askance.

"Boy," said he, "if you want fish, come to me with money. If you want news, go to the women of the market-place."

He pushed the canoe into deep water, and, using his right leg and foot to wield the paddle lazily, counted the copper and silver coins he had taken in for the fish.

"*Carramba!*" muttered Innocente as he stood watching the departing Moro. "In our market-place the women talk only of babies and their lazy men. He must have meant the women of the market-place of Ballywassan."

That very morning, while the owner of a canoe he had long coveted was at the cockpit, Innocente became busy. He took the one-eyed murderer's bolo from its hiding-place under the altar and wrapped it along with some bananas and green coconuts in his tattered sleeping-mat. Then, watching his chance, he stowed his bundle in the canoe and quietly departed.

The rest of the day he paddled and drifted with the tide, following the beach in the direction the fisherman had taken. Twice during the day he passed canoes at anchor, their occupants fishing.

"Where is Ballywassan?" he asked.

Both times the men, fishing, pointed ahead and turned their backs. Innocente paddled on, but the paddle became very heavy. He was about to beach his canoe and sleep, when he heard the music of Moro *agongs* in the distance. He forgot his fatigue and as he rounded a point of land that was one horn of a horse-shoe bay, came on the city of his search.

HE STOPPED the canoe to gaze spellbound. There were all of a hundred houses in Ballywassan. They were built on posts over the clear water, following the curve of the sandy beach. Behind the houses, like a green fringe, waved tall coconut-trees. Under the trees at one end of the *barrio* were roughly piled stones—monuments of a Moro graveyard. Near by was a mosque.

In the center of the curve of the shore were many small lean-tos and shelters made from the branches of coconut-trees. It was the market-place, and even now, when most of the people had departed, was a beehive of industry to Innocente.

He beached the canoe among a fleet of others and after rolling the bolo tightly in his sleeping-mat stuck the bundle under his arm and stepped ashore. On his way to the market-place he was joined by the youngsters of the *barrio*. He looked for a Filipino in the crowd; but they all had shaven heads, with the inevitable Mohammedan scalp-lock, by which they may be pulled through the pearly gate.

He was regarded as a curiosity, and asked many questions. As to where he was from? He lied fluently:

"Bolipongpong. I was fishing in my canoe. The wind blew strong. I could not paddle against it. When the wind died, the only land I could see was this, so here I am."

Then the men took him in hand, but he stuck to his story and was believed until the man who had taken fish to Innocente's *barrio* came home. After that Innocente's reputation for veracity was null and void. As no one could fathom his reason for lying, he was simply regarded as a *bobo*, which means a fool, and was allowed to remain in Ballywassan.

He found the wonders of the market-place a source of enduring delight. Most of his time was spent there. At low water, when the reef was exposed, he would accompany the women and children on their fishing-trips. There they would hunt for crustaceans and spear small fish in the clear, shallow pools of the reef.

It was on the reef that he met Omday, maker of salt. Her manufacturing-plant was a bright pool of salt water, handy to the beach, a few small clay pots and a fire.

The salt-maker was old. She used a cane to help her to walk and to use as a club.

"See, small *Christiano*," she said to Innocente, holding out a nicely baked plantain in one hand, while the other held the club behind her back, "the plantain is yours if you but get me a little driftwood for my fire."

Innocente considered while he scratched one bare leg with the big toe of his other foot.

"The plantain is too small, *matenda* (old woman) and likely rotten. It is rice and fish that I desire. Besides, the driftwood is far away."

"Old woman! Rotten! Thou malignant liar!" snarled the maker of salt in intense indignation. "Thou misbegotten spawn of a Christian pig, where are your manners? When my man returns from Bolipongpong I will have him beat you to a pulp."

At the mention of Bolipongpong Innocente was all attention.

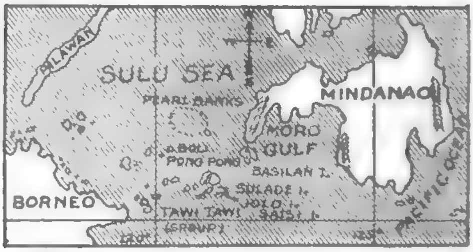
"*Ay de mi! Hermosa,*" he began in the contrite tones of one who has sinned and wishes pardon, "I was only jesting. Of course I will get you some wood."

"*Hermosa!* Forsooth! Keep your flattery for fools and treat me with respect."

Yet she chuckled when Innocente turned his back.

So Innocente gathered wood and tended the fire. For good measure he carried salt water and kept the clay pots full. Omday fed him all he could eat, and he grew fat.

After that entering wedge of friendship, founded on mutual advantage, it was but a short time till Innocente was selling salt in Omday's stall in the market-place. It was a question who was the prouder, Omday with a husky lad to do her bidding while she chewed betel nut and enjoyed to the full the envy of her neighbors, or Innocente, sultan of some dozen clay pots of dirty salt.



One morning there was an atmosphere of mystery in Ballywassan. The women of the market-place were dumb, or transacted their usual business in whispers. The fishers did not go out in their canoes. The wood-cutters and makers of copra were idle. In fact all the men stayed in the *barrio* and moved restlessly about. The shouting youngsters and skeleton dogs were oppressed by the prevailing gloom. Even the cock-pit was empty.

At *tunga waik*, or middle of the forenoon, when the faithful should have been saying their second morning prayer, a steamer arrived off the *barrio*. She did not anchor, but moved to and fro under slow speed. Her piercing whistle echoed and reechoed in the jungle, stirring the chickens to shrill cackles and the ubiquitous dogs into a whine that ended in a bark. It sent cold shivers up and down Innocente's spine and was a dread reminder of the first and last time he had heard the Coast Guard in his home *barrio*.

"Who has been killed, Omday, that the Constabulary is here?" he asked in awed tones.

"Hush, boy!" she said thickly. "It is not of your affair."

Then, following the example of the other women, she hurriedly covered her wares with mats and fled the market-place to her home.

Innocente joined the crowd on the beach that watched the oncoming boats. There were four of them, all loaded with Constabulary; and the steamer, cruising in small circles, had a gun crew standing by each rapid-fire gun at her bow and stern.

The boys and dogs were crowded to the edge of the throng when the Constabulary landed; but the commanding officer, as well as the *dato* and the *imam* from the mosque were all gifted with strong voices.

Innocente understood that a man from the *barrio* had been one of a party of outlaws who had raided a Chino store on the south end of Basilan Island. The officer wanted that man. He was in a hurry. He would give the head men five minutes to produce him before he put his soldiers to searching the houses. Then Innocente, who had shinned up a feathery bamboo stalk and disturbed a querulous bamboo lizard, saw the commanding officer turn his back on the *dato* and the *imam*, light a cigaret and look at his wrist-watch.

While the *dato* and *imam* were protesting that the man wanted was not of their *barrio*, the complaining croak of the lizard caused the officer to look up. He saw Innocente and grinned. The boy laughed aloud. It was his lieutenant of the past. He fairly ached to ask the officer if he had caught the one-eyed Moro yet, but held his peace.

"No," he said to himself. "A closed mouth catches no flies."

At the insistent clamoring of the head men of the *barrio* the commanding officer faced them again.

"Four minutes!" he said sternly.

It is possible the pair did not know the value of four minutes, but from the look on the officer's face they apparently surmised it was but a fleeting moment. They held an earnest but hurried confab with others of the *barrio*, scowled over their shoulders at the officer's back and disappeared behind the nearest nipa house.

Again Innocente laughed. Nothing was too bad to happen to a Moro. He knew from oft-repeated tales the results of a Constabulary house-to-house search—the wanton destruction of household goods—the loot of anything that took the troopers' fancies if it was small enough to conceal from the eagle eye of the commanding officer—the insults to the women. Yes, it was enough to make a Filipino laugh, but he did not want any of Omday's salt stolen. That meant more work for him, and work was one thing that he despised beyond all the lieutenant's comprehension.

Innocente's musings were interrupted by the arrival of the *dato* and *imam*, hand in hand with a contrite-looking youth. The raider looked anything but the part. He might have been a schoolboy with his bashful mien and soft, pink cheeks. The commanding officer spoke sharply to his men, who took the prisoner in charge and led him to a boat and all embarked. The people dispersed to their homes, but gloom hung over the *barrio* all day, and one house was a house of mourning.

The next day business went on as usual in the market-place. People must have salt and live, even if the Constabulary do take their men. Across the sylvan aisle from Omday's stall was a young woman who sold betel nut and all that pertained thereto.

When times were good, or in other words when her man had made a successful trip in his sailing *vinta* to Sandakan, in British North Borneo, the young woman had second-class opium in her camphorwood chest for sale. Also the hairlike Chinese tobacco mixed with opium dross and rolled into the sticky, brownish-black pills the Malays love to carry between their lower lips and front teeth.

All these quick-selling articles had the woman but a few days before. Now as she looked at her depleted stock and realized she had no man to bring her more she wailed and tore at her hair.

"My man is gone!" she cried with tears in her eyes to Omday across the path. "The best man in all Ballywassan, gone to the prison of the Christian pigs where they will murder him."

"Too bad, Bujun" (young woman) replied Omday, "but better men have gone that way before."

"He was such a brave fighter!" wailed the seller of betel nut. "Even the soldiers of the *Angalis* in Sandakan did him reverence as a killer," she added boastfully.

This last statement seemed too much for the valiant Omday.

"Fighter! Killer!" she scorned. "Thou cradle-robber, my man could twist his puny neck with one hand. My man is with Angel on Bolipongpong Island. Angel, the greatest *mundo* of them all. So boast not of your callow youngling to me."

Omday in her tattered *sarong* glared haughtily at all within hearing.

The seller of betel nut took refuge in silence and tears.

Innocente, listening to this tirade, received a shock of surprize.

"*Carramba!*" he mused. "Can Omday's man be my one-eyed murderer, the man I have sworn to kill? I must find out."

He grinned with anticipated pleasure.

SHORTLY after the time of first morning prayer next day Innocente was at the market-place waiting for Omday to appear. While he waited he polished a speck of rust from his dearest possession, the one-eyed murderer's bolo. He must keep that great knife sharp and shining against the day——

"Boy! Where did you steal that fighting-bolo?"

Omday was speaking. Her voice was ominously calm, and her black eyes glittered venomously as she looked down at him.

Innocente stopped polishing the bolo, looked up at her with a startled expression and squirmed. Omday's mien heralded a storm, a veritable typhoon; he must pacify her.

"*Ay de mi!* Omday," he said in the conciliatory tone of one inviting a confidence, "what makes you think I stole the worthless old bolo?"

"Answer me! Thou limb of Satan!"

"*Carramba!* It is as I thought. The old woman does recognize the bolo, and I must get her to take me to her one-eyed man," mused Innocente.

To Omday he answered—

"A Sulu man of Bolipongpong gave it to me."

"Well!"

"He said, the one-eyed man did:

" 'Go search for the woman who claims this bolo as belonging to her husband. Say that I divorce her if she does not come to me at once.' "

"Prince of liars! What strange tale is this? Why did you not speak of this matter before?"

"But you never claimed the bolo before, *señora!*"

"I never saw it till this moment, and I do not claim it now, *animale.* But it is of no consequence to me. My man has two good eyes."

Omday shrugged and gesticulated gracefully with the hand that was not holding her cane.

Innocente's heart sank. He was losing ground in this war of words, but he hung on with the tenacity of one of his native land crabs.

"*Ay de mi!*" he cogitated. "Am I wrong after all, or is it that the old Señora Spitfire is afraid to lead me to her man? *Por Dios!* I try me another argument. Loco with jealousy will I make her."

"Maybe that is so, Omday," he said in his soft voice, "but the woman who was with him said he could see more beauty in a woman and fight better than most men with two eyes."

"Woman!" uttered Omday, showing a gold tooth and tightening her grip on the cane. "What woman? Tell me of her!"

"*Carramba!* But she was beautiful! Tall, young and as graceful as a young deer. Many bracelets of gold were on her arms and legs——"

There is no telling how far Innocente's imagination would have carried him if he had not heard the swish of the bamboo cane and glimpsed it—a streak of amber light—descending on his head. From his squatting position on the ground he fell over, and the cane missed its objective. He came to his feet quickly and with difficulty concealing his delight, faced her.

"Why do you try to beat me?" he said in his soft voice. "I was but telling you the truth."

"Truth!" echoed Omday, her voice and lips trembling with wrath. "The truth is not in you, you——"

She paused; she paused, evidently groping for a word strong enough to express what she thought of him.

"And yet," she continued, giving voice to her thoughts, "he may be telling the truth. But how to find out?"

"By the test, Omday! By the test!" eagerly exclaimed the boy.

He was certain, now, that his one-eyed murderer was Omday's man, and he must make her lead the way to him.

"What test?" asked Omday angrily.

"Why, we'll go to Bolipongpong Island, and you can see if I am telling the truth."

"You are right, boy! For once in your unhallowed life you are right. This matter is too serious for my peace of mind. We will got to Bolipongpong, and Allah have mercy on your Christian hide if I find you have been lying to me."

Three days were Omday and Innocente

on their voyage to Bolipongpong, sometimes anchoring the canoe to fish, again beaching it at some small *barrio* to obtain food and exchange gossip. When passing Bucutua Island, which is as famous for its land crabs as Sulade is for its sea serpents, the boy must needs go ashore for some crabs. Omday demurred at first.

"Crabs, forsooth! *Bobo,* is not the canoe overloaded now with food? Can you think of nothing but to eat? Let thy desire be to wield the paddle, that we may regain the wind again beyond this island." But Innocente persisted in his demand for crabs; and as Omday was showing signs of fatigue from the hard work at the paddle, she bade him in tones of patient resignation to beach the canoe and get them.

She was munching a mouthful of betel nut when the boy returned.

"See, Omday!" he shouted, holding aloft a monster land crab. "The *bisabuelo,* the great grandfather of all crabs! Watch him leer and reach for my hand with his great claw. Him we will tame and put him to work at cutting driftwood that you may make salt."

The idea pleased the boy immensely. He chuckled softly at his extravagant conceit of fancy and went on:

"Already have I a name for this sultan of all land crabs. Vencedor is his name. Knowest thou what it means in thy language, Omday *mia?*"

"You weary me with your foolish chatter, boy! Stop it and enter the canoe."

Innocente complied. Putting the crab on its back, he cut a short length of green bijuca vine and in a twinkling had the crab triced so it could not turn over and walk. While he worked he continued to chatter.

"Vencedor means a big chief—a conqueror, Omday."

And when he had put the big crab in the bottom of his canoe and resumed his paddling a look of grim determination came into his boyish eyes. With an unconscious squaring of the shoulders he said to himself—

"It also means a foiler, Omday *mia.*"

Innocente's day dreams of the vengeance he would take on the murderer of his mother and sick brother had all been intensely, Orientally dramatic—too dramatic to be practicable. Now after hours of meditation in the canoe, when he had nothing to do but eat and watch the flying-fish in the blue and green waters between the islands, he had hit on a scheme of revenge that was infallible.

At Balukbaluk Island, where dwelt a brother of Omday's, they heard news, grievous news that concerned themselves. The brother of Omday had white hair. When he stood up the skin on his knees folded into deep creases.

"*Sampang! Ka-kah,* welcome, sister," he said, regarding her affectionately. "Where do you travel?"

"To Bolipongpong. My man sends for me."

The brother studied her features a moment with increasing concern.

"So!" he said. "The tidings from Bolipongpong have not reached you then."

"Tidings! What tidings?" asked Omday anxiously, while Innocente, who was about to hunt for more crabs, caught his change of tone and stopped short to hear the old man's answer.

"Bad news, sister. By the beard of the Prophet, they could not be worse. Your man, Moro Angel and all his men have been killed by the Constabulary. But they fought well, sister. Many of the police are buried on the beach near the grave of Angel and his men."

"*Diablo!*" muttered Innocente in consternation as he watched Omday swaying like a tall tree in the wind and heard her moan.

After a time when she had regained her composure her brother told the tale as it had been passed on to him, while Omday sat in tearful silence, and the boy fairly devoured the old man's words.

"That Omday's man is killed you have no proof, *hadji!*" stated the boy in matter-of-fact tones when the old man paused for breath. "As for me, I require proof."

The brother looked at him in astonishment, while a gleam of hope lighted up the tearful eyes of Omday. She nodded her agreement at the boy.

"Boy!" said the old man sternly, springing to his feet with flashing eyes. "Your words are the disrespectful words of a Christian *bobo.* A *hadji* I am not. But," he continued haughtily, his hand seeking the handle of the bolo by his side, "since when have I been known to lie?"

"Peace, *señor!*" said Innocente humbly. "I offered no disrespect. I but meant that the people who told you may have been misinformed. If they have, what joy will be Omday's! We must hasten on our way and see if by any lucky chance you have been misinformed."

Omday offered a few soothing remarks, and the old man, partly mollified, resumed his seat. But he kept a resentful eye on Innocente until he and Omday proceeded on their voyage.

LATE the following afternoon they beached their canoe by a cluster of some half-dozen nipa houses on Bolipongpong Island.

Innocente began to feel nervous. He had not forgotten that he had told Omday that his home was on Bolipongpong Island, and he wondered how he could keep up the deception. Omday might kill him herself if she guessed the truth of his mission.

Carramba! He would bluff it out! So as they were pulling the canoe out of water as far as their strength permitted, to the accompaniment of barking skeleton dogs and naked, inquisitive children, Omday's question did not catch him off his guard.

"We go to your papa's house, boy?"

"No, Omday. *Carramba*, no! Many leagues is it from here, and the night will soon come. We sleep in this *barrio*, and tomorrow— But *maldito!* Where are the men of this place? Dogs we see and hear. Children we see. Also the women come, but not a man do we behold. It is an ill omen for our hopes, Omday."

Omday's face blanched for a moment, but when she turned to greet the small crowd of approaching women her features were composed.

"*Salaam*, friends!" said she.

"*Sampang*, welcome!" answered the women as they gathered round her and Innocente.

Then a tall, beautiful woman, dressed in a tight-fitting coat and a *sarong* of yellow silk, with much native jewelry on her person, spoke.

"I am—was," she hastily corrected while the other women moaned, "the wife of the *panglima* of this *barrio*. But the Constabulary did kill him. Ah, a man among men was Angel, and true to a friend."

"So you were the woman of Angel," said Omday in deferential tones.

"Yes, and the only one," answered the woman proudly.

"I have often heard of you. As far as Ballywassan did the fame of your beauty and virtue reach," said Omday.

"Ballywassan!" exclaimed the woman of Angel with a keen look at Omday. "So! but we speak of Ballywassan later; now I tell you of our misfortune."

Innocente squirmed and dug his toes in the sand.

"*Madre mia!*" he wailed to himself. "But the woman is long-winded! Will she ever come to the point?"

He looked imploringly at the widow as she began her tale with much circumlocution.

The tale was a repetition of that told by Omday's brother, garnished in picturesque details that had not yet reached the brother or that he had forgotten.

Briefly the Constabulary had made a successful raid, and according to the written report not a man of a list of twenty outlaws had escaped the shallow grave on the beach. A company of Constabulary were still camped on the island.

"And there was only one man escaped," said the widow of Angel at the conclusion of her tale of the fight.

"And he—?" gasped Omday faintly.

She tottered and sat on the gunwale of the canoe. Innocente's eyes seemed to be popping out of his head.

"A Sulu man of Ballywassan. A man of one eye, Moro Antonan by name," said the wife of Angel.

She put a protecting arm round Omday's waist lest she collapse from overstrung nerves.

"*Carramba!* He is your man, Omday!" said Innocente, his eyes peering into her face.

"He may be," said Omday doubtfully, "but my man had two eyes. But the name is the name of my man," she said hopefully.

"He is your man without doubt," agreed the widow. "I remember the wound of his eye was still unhealed when he joined us. He boasted of a big fight in a Filipino *barrio*, where he lost the eye but slew many Christians. That must have been after he left Ballywassan and you."

Innocente ground his teeth with rage.

"Fight!" he wanted to yell with fine scorn. "It was no fight; it was cold-blooded murder."

What he did say in his soft voice, was—

"Where can I find Omday's man, that I may bring him to her?"

The widow looked sharply at him before answering:

"Safe in the jungle is he, on the north side of the island. But you could never find him, boy!"

She paused a moment, evidently studying ways and means. Then—

"At first cock-crowing we leave food in a deserted house just within the edge of the jungle."

"Why so late? *Carramba!* Nearly half the night is then passed," exclaimed Innocente complainingly.

"The Constabulary, you *bobo!* They are still on the island," said the widow harshly. "Suppose the soldiers see us carry food to a deserted house. The man of Omday would soon be under the sand with his friends. This night do you go with the woman who carries the food. She will leave the basket in the doorway, but you remain till the man of one eye comes for his food."

"I go also," stated Omday emphatically when the other woman paused for a moment.

"No, no!" commanded the widow. "Great is the distance. You could never walk it in time, and there is no carabao or pony to ride. You must stay here with me. Besides, should the Constabulary see a party of three— No, it is impossible. The boy can carry the news of your arrival. It will put heart in the man, and when the soldiers take their leave, back to Ballywassan can you take him."

Omday gave in protestingly. Turning to Innocente, she said:

"You must have a token from me, boy, so my man will know you are not lying. My ring! Give it to him and say that I await his commands."

She pulled the Moro ring from her finger, and while passing it to Innocente the widow of Angel spoke again.

"It is my advice that you start at once, boy. The woman is ready with the food, and the trail is long."

So Innocente and his guide started on their long walk.

But before leaving, and when the women of the *barrio* had dispersed to their homes, the boy took the murderer's gorgeous fighting-bolo that was wrapped in his sleeping-mat, from the canoe and tied the bundle to one end of a short bamboo pole. Next came Vencedor, the conqueror, straining mightily at his lashings. The boy fastened him to the other end of the pole and, swinging the load across his shoulders Chinese fashion, followed the girl who was to lead him to the object of his vengeance.

The sun was just below the western horizon when they left the *barrio*. The big moon, a ball of polished silver, was shining in the east, so instead of the short tropical twilight, followed by darkness, it promised to be twilight all night save when the black rain-clouds in the southwest, now edged with gold from the sinking sun, would drift slowly over them.

Innocente's guide, a comely young woman, looked over her shoulders at him and sniffed disdainfully.

"For the love of Allah, boy, why carry you the horrible-looking crab?"

"Horrible!" quoth Innocente. "*Carramba!* Vencedor is a beauty. Omday, my aunt, sends it to her man. He has much liking for crabs."

"What a *bobo* it is!"

She gave another sniff of contempt.

"*Bobo* again, is it?" he muttered. "Soon will I show them all who is the *bobo.*"

He plodded on behind his guide in the narrow trail. Most of the time the path was through tall cogon grass, across wide savannas. Again over rolling hills where the cogon grass was shorter, and an occasional plot of ground overgrown with weeds, gave mute evidence of last season's taro patch.

All the time they were ascending, and when they topped a certain small hill his guide stopped.

"From now on, boy, we go with caution," she whispered. "There," she went on, pointing to the north, "is the jungle that hides your man. And there," pointing in the same general direction, but a little to the left, "is the Constabulary."

Innocente looked until his eyes hurt. Far in the distance was a narrow streak, darker than the intervening space. Its farther edge was bordered by the glistening, silvery sea. It was the jungle. Of the Constabulary camp he could see nothing.

"The distance is still great, *bujun*; let us hurry."

"Aye, hurry, and run into the soldiers, *Bobo*," she said sarcastically. "We walk fast when the cogon grass shelters us, but in the open we slow up and take advantage of every shelter. Know you not that the soldiers have glasses they use in the night? An owl can not see as well."

Innocente remained silent, but he marveled at a glass that could make one see better than an owl at night. They started on their journey down the long, easy grade, as stealthy in their bare feet as two wildcats.

* * *

THE guide stopped at every prominence to survey their surroundings for the Constabulary. Suddenly she stopped, and held forth a warning hand.

"The patrol!" she whispered, soft as the evening breeze.

Beckoning to Innocente, she scurried into the cogon grass like a scared rabbit. He sank to the ground by her side, and together they waited for the soldiers to pass.

"——! I know that voice!" whispered Innocente as a joyous laugh floated up to them. "It is the *teniente Americano* who came to my *barrio* and to Ballywassan."

"It is a Christian devil," murmured the guide with a shudder, "and we must fly. Quick! Do you go one way, and I another. When he comes to the divided trail undecided will he be which to follow. By chance he may follow neither. When he is gone, do you follow your own trail back to this spot, where I will meet you."

She disappeared like a fleeting shadow.

Innocente started in the opposite direction, but he lost his bearings in the tall grass and came out on the main trail behind the Constabulary. Down this trail he ran, and as the jungle's edge approached he kept a sharp watch-out for the faint trail on the right, that led to the deserted house.

Suddenly an apparition popped out of the grass near the side of the path. It waved a ghost-like arm in the moonlight. Innocente crossed himself piously and ran faster, gasping for breath. He was staggering with fatigue when the apparition spoke.

"Hola! *Bobo!*" a voice said mockingly. "Why the imitation of a runaway pony? The dim little path to the deserted house will you miss if you charge down the hill like a mad bull. Come back here, foolish one. Here is where we turn off the trail for the jungle. Another minute you would have charged the Constabulary camp like a mad carabao running amuck.

Innocente staggered back, his lips forming the word, "*bujun*," though no words came from them.

The guide, evidently giving him time to recover, went on:

"What has delayed you? This long time have I waited. What said your friend, the *teniente*?"

Then Innocente found his voice.

"*Carramba!* I took you for the spirit of the savannas, *bujun*. And the *teniente Americano* did see me and gave chase with all his soldiers. But I escaped them and ran wonderfully fast. Observe how I lack breath?"

"Liar!" exclaimed the young woman scornfully. "Just ahead of you have I been ever since you blundered into the trail. But hurry; if you find Omday's man dead from starvation, you will be to blame."

They hurried on in silence. As they entered the jungle the boy stared into the gloom with fascinated intensity.

"See!" whispered the *bujun* as she pointed ahead of her.

The boy peered, and as his eyes grew accustomed to the semi-gloom he was able to separate the outlines of the deserted house from the surrounding trees and sinuous vines.

It was a small structure built on four posts about six feet from the ground, and leaned drunkenly back from the overgrown clearing in front of it. Patches of its rotting nipa thatch were slipping, like the hair on a water-logged corpse.

Moonbeams filtered through the frame of the house where the thatch had been. They illumined the interior with a dim, greenish light, like the phosphorescent glow inside a moldy skull. Through the yawning doorway and window-frame were seen fireflies, flitting aimlessly about. Green mold and fungus like pestilent warts grew on its supports, while a noisome odor hung in the stagnant air.

The young woman, followed by Innocente, stepped noiselessly to the repellent doorway. She climbed a short, creaking, bamboo ladder and placed the basket of food on the floor, after which she stepped down and stood for a moment listening to the multitudinous sounds of jungle life. Evidently she failed to hear an expected signal, for she shook her head. Then, lifting her face to the sky, clear as a soft-toned bell, she gave a perfect imitation of the amorous cooing of the wild dove.

"*Carramba! Bujun!* The will dove calls in the day, and at the time of the third afternoon prayer, which is after sunset," whispered Innocente.

"Of a truth, foolish one. That is why I called. Your man will know it is not a dove calling. He knows that his fast will soon be over and that all is well."

She waved him a parting salute; and the boy, with moisture on his brow and the hair bristling on the back of his head, suddenly realized that he stood alone.

By a supreme effort of will he shook off the superstitious fear that held him in a vise-like grip.

"*Maldito!*" he murmured. "My work must be done. Away with foolish terrors!"

He unfastened Vencedor from the bamboo pole and hung him, still triced up, to the limb of a near-by tree, out of reach of marauding wild pigs. In the crotch of the same limb he placed the murderer's bolo. Then with his tattered sleeping-mat under his arm he returned to the house and climbed the complaining bamboo ladder.

The floor of the house, what there was of it, was made of split bamboo with the smooth, convex side up. Each piece of flooring was about three inches wide and was lashed with bijuca vine to the hardwood floor joists beneath it. On this floor at the open doorway the boy unrolled his sleeping-mat and smoothed out the corners nicely with a prehensile toe. Preliminary to lying down for what he thought would be a short wait for his man, he thoroughly explored the interior of the small, one-roomed house.

The floor held him up, much to his surprize, but it creaked and groaned wherever he stepped. The whole structure protested his presence with almost human wails whenever he moved. Overhead, lizards rustled the nipa thatch, while wood rats scampered over the bamboo floor.

A long centipede, its fuzz glistening like black sable, made a true course for his sleeping-mat. He picked it up as one would a kitten, by the back of the neck, and threw it through the door, again nonchalantly using his big toe to perform the work.

Satisfied that no human enemy lurked in the house, he sat on his mat in the doorway to await the coming of his man, that the last act in his drama of revenge might be enacted. From his pocket he drew forth a brightly polished brass betel-nut box, which he opened and laid on the sleeping-mat beside him. The box had lately adorned a shelf in the stall of the betel-nut seller in the market-place of Ballywassan. The boy regarded it whimsically as he thought of what its owner said when she missed it.

"*Diablo!* Mad must the *bujun* have been beyond all reason. Of a certainty she took her troubles to the *dato*—even disturbed the peaceful old *imam* with her tale of how that brat of Omday's had stolen her best betel-nut box and opium to the value of one peso."

The boy chuckled softly at the picture in his mind's eye and helped himself to a generous mouthful of betel nut. So wrapped in his reveries was he that he failed to note the materialization of a human form at the corner of the clearing opposite him. First the head took shape, framed in the green leaves of the jungle. It was bullet-shaped and was covered with a short, bristling stubble of black hair. Below a simian forehead a single black eye glared at the boy in the doorway.

The thick lips were drawn in a snarl and disclosed teeth that were filed down to two horizontal lines of black stubs. As he slowly arose it could be seen that he was naked save for a pair of ragged, skin-tight trousers. They were a dirty yellow in color, and much frayed at the bottoms, where they extended out over his scarred, splay feet, with a row of buttons sewed to the outside seams.

AS THE man stepped into the clearing and the moonlight a bamboo lizard croaked harshly. Innocente looked up at the sound and discovered his man approaching. Again the boy felt the skin creep on the back of his head—this time more with rage than fear.

He spat a huge mouthful of saliva, red from betel nut, and yawned prodigiously.

"Hola! Sulu man of Ballywassan!" he called with assumed ease of manner, though his heart was pounding and drops of sweat formed on his brow. "It is good that my long vigil is finished. I bring word from Omday, your wife."

Silently the outlaw advanced and climbed the ladder until he faced the boy, and fixed his one eye on Innocente's features with a stare that curdled his blood. Still he was silent. Innocente summoned his courage and returned the gaze of the outlaw. In a moment he had his voice under control, and said:

"Omday, your woman, is on this island. I, the son of your woman's brother, Mosa, of Balukbaluk, brought her here. She sends her ring that you may know I speak the truth."

"*Bobo!*" sneered the man with indescribable scorn, and spat viciously to show his contempt.

Then he stepped lightly up the ladder into the room, where he stood motionless, listening, and peering at the surrounding jungle with his one eye.

Apparently satisfied that no one but the boy was near, he squatted on the floor by the boy's side and pulled the basket of food in front of him.

This silence of the outlaw's was getting on Innocente's nerves.

"*Carramba!*" he thought. "Why does not the brute say something? Does he remember me after all this time? If he does——"

He shuddered, but smiled in the outlaw's face as the latter suddenly reached for the betel-nut box and took it to him.

"So!" the man snarled sarcastically with a venomous look at the boy. "The Christian *bobo*, son of Mosa, the true believer, eats opium!"

He grinned evilly, picked the small horn opium container from the brass box, and helped himself so greedily that, being deprived of opium since his escape from the Constabulary, his craving appetite ignored moderation.

"*Gracios à Dios!* The brute is mine now, with that big dose of opium inside of him," Innocente told himself, "unless—" and the thought made him shiver—"the *animale* holds it not on his stomach."

To the outlaw he said:

"No; Omday, your woman, sends it to you. From the seller of betel nut in the market-place of Ballywassan she bought it, and opium to the value of one peso."

"Allah be praised! The Prophet thinks with favor on my woman for a good deed."

The snarl was gone from the man's voice, and Innocente was delighted. But delight changed to apprehension as the outlaw continued:

"As for you, young *Christiano*, your action in bringing it is without virtue. I saw you come from the camp of the Constabulary."

"No, no!" denied Innocente. "I came with the *bujun* with your food; from the *barrio* of the widow of Angel we came."

"Again Allah be praised! Nevertheless, young *Christiano*," he continued drowsily, "my conscience would smite me did I let you live. Many times have I regretted that I did not kill you at the buffalo wallow that morning. But before we attend to duty, *bobo*——"

He brought his bullet head up with a jerk and batted his single eye foolishly.

"What said I, Mosa of Balukbaluk?" he went on after a moment, drunkenly mixing his words. His head drooped again, and his eye closed.

The opium was working fast on Moro Antonan of Ballywassan. He had taken a bigger helping of the drug than he realized. The boy watched him solemnly, scarce able to contain himself for joy.

"Soon will he be as sluggish as a gorged boa," he thought.

Then he saw the outlaw's eye close, saw his chin moored snugly to the barrel-like chest that rose and fell with each breath.

"*Maldito!*" muttered the boy. "He sleeps like a carabao, on his feet."

For Moro Antonan of Ballywassan was still sitting on his heels and bade fair to spend the night in that upright position with his elbows on his knees.

"Now how shall I topple over this mountain of sin without waking him?" cogitated the boy anxiously. "It is necessary that he lie on his back to fulfil the play. If I push him over and he awakens—*madre mia!* I shall wait till he goes deeper into the land of slumber and then roll him over."

So Innocente waited, but while he waited he was very busy. Slowly and cautiously he eased himself through the doorway and dropped to the ground. The bamboo ladder was too noisy. He retrieved the fighting bolo and after inspecting Vencedor gathered many feet of bijuca vine from the surrounding jungle.

Small, green vines about the diameter of a common lead-pencil he chose. He tested each piece for strength and cut them all in fathom lengths, to be easily handled. When he had sufficient lines he coiled them neatly and took them to the house. The moon was well on its way into the west and cast its beams into the gaping doorway and window, making each detail on the floor distinct.

From the clearing Innocente could see his man in the same position as when he left him, but now he was making frightful sounds in his throat in breathing.

"*Carramba!* The *bruto* will waken himself by his own gurgles and snores. I must hasten and lay him out," the boy murmured.

He put the bolo and vines under the house and as carefully as he could climbed the squeaking ladder again. With bated breath he approached the squatting outlaw's back; and, bracing himself for the effort, he gripped the man's sweaty shoulders and began a slow and steady pull.

The man subconsciously resisted the strain, leaning far forward on the balls of his feet. Innocente's hands suddenly slipped and the man, unable to gain his equipoise, toppled over on his face and rolled sidewise. Two hurried steps took Innocente to the doorway, where he stood ready to jump and run to the Constabulary for safety. But the outlaw's crash to the floor—the rocking of the crazy house with its creaks and groans—all failed to bring him back to consciousness. Instead, he straightened out his limbs and with a grunt of seeming satisfaction began to snore in earnest.

The boy stood silent as a shadow and watched him closely lest he be playing 'possum in order to await the development of the game. Satisfied at last that the outlaw was not feigning sleep, Innocente brought the vines and bolo and lashed the object of his vengeance to the floor joists of the building.

A stroke of the bolo cut the rotten bijuca-vine lashings of a piece of bamboo flooring an arm's length from each side of the prostrate outlaw. The man was lying parallel to the flooring, which simplified matters immensely.

Innocente picked up the two pieces of flooring and laid them aside for future use. Then he gently lifted an arm of the sleeping outlaw and put it down straight out from his side. The wrist came over a floor joist, and over the opening that was made when the piece of flooring was removed. Next he took a fathom length of the fresh vine and passed turn after turn of the vine around wrist and floor joist. He fitted each turn nicely by the side of its fellow and put no great strain on them, for he intended after all the lashings were passed, to tighten them by frapping, as sailors do, or by binding the turns together, as the outriggers of canoes are fastened when all the lashings are passed. To tighten each lashing at once was out of the question. The excessive pain in wrist and ankles when the vines sank into the flesh would surely awaken him, and Innocente was taking no risks.

Then the other wrist was bound, and the ankles treated in like manner, until Antonan was trussed, spread-eagle fashion, and secure. To make doubly sure the man could not squirm free, Innocente now commenced to frap the lashings. He was working at the second wrist when the outlaw opened his drowsy, bloodshot eye.

The man was silent a moment, the expression on his face one of utter disbelief in a bad dream, shaded with lazy tolerance for the puny efforts of the small boy. But when he would sweep aside the boy working so industriously he roared with rage and pain.

"Unbind me! Pig!" he grated through set teeth.

Innocente took the last hitch in the vine he was frapping and grinned with satisfaction.

"Ho!" he said with assumed good nature. "The vines hurt, no? There is much virtue in the bijuca-vine. It will recall to your carabao mind the agony of my sick brother whom you toasted on the fire before you ran away that morning in the *barrio*."

Then he picked up another length of vine and frapped the turns on the outlaw's ankles.

The man pulled and strained at the lashings. He arched himself on neck and heels, and crashed back on the springy bamboo floor. But the vines held and sank deeper into the tortured flesh. The crazy house trembled as it creaked and groaned, causing lizards and wood rats to scamper away like rats from a sinking ship.

"*Viva! Bruto!*" cried Innocente exultantly. "Pull and strain and take the stretch out of the vines that I may bind them the tighter."

He hitched the last vine and with a sigh of relief stood up and looked at his enemy.

The man lay still, breathing in gasps. The sweat was streaming from him, and his one eye blazed with impotent fury.

"Now, old One-Eye," said the boy, "the real play commences. Vencedor will play his part. Rest that you may enjoy the drama with much gusto. While you rest, meditate on the clumsy way in which you hacked my mother and toasted her on the burning house. Compare your awkward work with that of the real fighter, Vencedor."

Without waiting for an answer to his speech the boy lashed the two pieces of flooring he had laid aside for that purpose to the ceiling joists over the outlaw. Then he darted down the bamboo ladder, begrudging the seconds that kept him from the climax of his revenge, to Vencedor, the crab.

"Ho! Conqueror!" he cried, exalted to an enthusiasm that bordered on frenzy while he freed the crab from the tree. "It is time for you, the hero, to enter the play."

In a twinkling he was back inside the house with the crab, and fastened him, his big claw waving free, to the two pieces of flooring directly over the man's heaving chest.

To the handle of the murderer's bolo he attached one end of a short vine. The other end he placed in the crab's claw, and left the bolo dangling above the outlaw's heart.

"Now, *amigo* Vencedor," urged the boy, "show Angel's right-hand man what you can do to him with his own bolo."

The claw crunched on the vine, waved unsteadily in the air, and severed it. The bolo dropped like a streak of light.

"*Carramba! Bobo* crab!" swore Innocente as he jerked the bolo out of the floor an inch from the outlaw's side. "Thou art as clumsy with a knife as this offal on the floor. Try again, clown, and if you miss, may your name be a byword among all crabs forever. You have to do the work, that I may tell the world that the great, fighting *teniente* of the famous Angel was killed by a crab—not worthy to be killed by a man.

"*Carramba!* How his friends will laugh and spit with disgust! And you, *animale*," he went on, speaking to the outlaw on the floor, "when I bury you with a pig—if there is anything to bury but stinking bones—your friends will say:

"'*Carramba!* That boy Innocente was not such a *bobo* after all!'"

So saying, he put the vine in the crab's claw again and gave Vencedor a sharp rap with his knuckles.

The bolo dropped like a plummet, and its point, entering the floor under the outlaw's heart, seemed to be a signal for the advance guard of an army of ants to charge with savagely waving antennæ along the outlaw's left arm.

"WILD BILL'S" DERRINGER

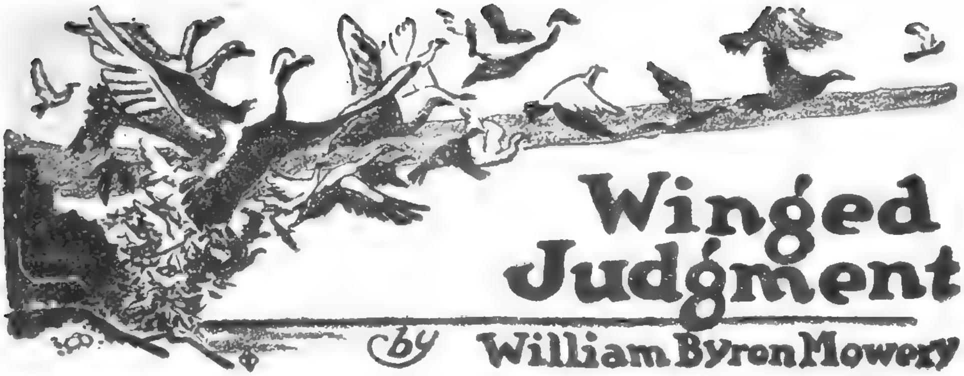
by Raymond W. Thorp

AMONG the many guns which were carried at different times by the once famous gunfighter and marshal, Wild Bill Hickok, his Derringer held a unique place in his affections.

As is well-known, Wild Bill's favorite outward dress consisted of a wide-brimmed black felt hat, long black coat of pulpit cut, trousers of the same material and a pair of made to measure boots. A low-cut black vest completed his attire, under which in a small holster, reposed the above-mentioned weapon when not in use.

The little Derringer is a calibre .41, rimfire, made by Williamson of New York, and is now owned by Mr. M. C. Clark, a noted weapon collector. It was given to Buffalo Bill by Hickok in the year 1875, just a year before the latter was murdered by Jack McCall, Colonel Cody in turn giving the weapon to Mr. Clark's father.

The little gun is a beautiful piece of workmanship, being heavily gold-plated all over and finely engraved. The stock is a beautiful piece of curly maple, finely polished. Upon presenting this gun to Cody, Wild Bill told him that it had accounted for twenty-six men, either killed or wounded, between the years of 1867 and 1875.



Winged Judgment

by William Byron Mowery

Author of "The Lob-Stick," "The Cabin Window," etc.

"STOP that snivelin', youse old ——, or I'll——"

Brude Haas, of the cod schooner *Grayling*, left the threat suspended. He was squatting beside a small pool of water, testing eggs of the eider and the ringed-murre. One egg in ten was good and sank; the nine that floated, with chicks half-hatched or even ready to chip the shell, were splattered on the land-wash boulders.

Among the weaving, panicky rookeries along the beach, along the higher ledges and in the soft white moss of the island's crest, three of the *Grayling* crew were gathering eggs in their hats and bringing them to Mate Haas. The air was full of the *whirr* of wings and the querulous *ah-ah-ah* of wheeling parent-birds. From the pile of untested eggs came a faint, plaintive *teeter-peeping*.

"Gimme them that floats, b'y," old Sam'l Ellison pleaded.

He hovered close beside Haas, watching, frantic, a-quiver in all his aged joints.

"Jest them that floats, b'y," he whimpered. "I'll put 'em back so's they will hatch."

"Like ——!" the mate snapped, without ceasing his work. "Youse git over t' hill to your shack an' don't stick your nose in our business agin. What t' —— are youse carryin' on about? Youse don't own this island nor these birds, heh?"

"Gimme them that floats, b'y," old Ellison quavered repeatedly. "I'll put 'em back in the nests an' then there will be birds here another year. Jest them that floats, b'y."

Brude Haas straightened up, took a step toward the old man, and thrust out his square jaw.

"Git t' —— gone!" he blared. "Git *now*, afore I have to poke youse. There's goin' to be no eggs put back. There's goin' to be no eggs left; so's when we come back in a few days all t' eggs will be fresh-laid an' good."

"You're not goin' to tramp 'em?" old Ellison quavered afresh.

A dry sob shook him. He cowered before the mate, but held his ground doggedly.

"Tramp them eggs with chicks breakin' the shell? You won't do that, b'y?"

Haas took him roughly by the shoulder, and leading him a dozen yards up the slope, gave him a shove:

"Now git across to your shack. If youse come back nosin' around here, I'll smear youse, b' ——!"

Old Ellison trudged to the top of the crest and crouched behind a shrub, with his eyes fixed upon the mate. Every egg that splattered on the rocks made him wince. He groaned as the hatfuls of eggs were poured on the ground beside the testing-pool.

"That'll do, fellers," Brude Haas said at length, as all three came back together with the spoils of several dozen nests. "We've got most a bushel of good 'uns now. They'll last us till we can jicker t' old man into lettin' us come agin. We'll tramp t' others. This testin' is too —— slow work."

Old Ellison rose up wild-eyed as the four men started in deploy along the slope. Brude Haas, engaged in destroying a dozen nests in a little colony of razor-billed auks, looked up and saw the old livyere stumbling toward him.

"I'll tell the inspector!" Ellison blustered, shaking a trembling fist at the mate. "You tramp another egg, an' sure as —— I'll tell the inspector if I have to go down the coast an' find him. God'll curse you all your days for this."

Whereat two of the men laughed. But Brude Haas's face turned purple.

"I seen your boat out there beyant the reefs," the old man shouted, too beside himself to take warning from the mate's face. "It's the *Grayling*, out of St. George's. You'll never fish in these waters ag'in. You'll never steal a good skipper's rattle——"

The mate covered the ground between himself and old Ellison in one jump. With open hand he smacked the livyere across the mouth and sent him sprawling.

"I'll tell him!" Ellison spluttered, rising on one knee.

"One more word, old ——, an' youse won't live to tell nobody nothink." Haas breathed dangerously.

He twisted his fingers into the old livyere's jacket-collar and dragged him to his feet.

"Here, Brude!" Denk McRennel broke in, stepping toward the pair. "Don't manhandle that old fellow. I don't blame him one —— second. We're makin' brutes of ourselves because Skipper Higgins was too stingy to lay in enough decent grub for the v'yage. I don't tramp another egg, an' you don't lay hands on that old man ag'in! D'you hear?"

The mate let loose of Ellison and faced McRennel. The latter, a stalwart young fellow, smooth-cheeked and deep-chested, was half a head taller than any of them. Thick muscle-pads covered his shoulders and swelled out his arms. He stood straight as an Indian, on legs cleanly built and wide apart. A fighting fire was leaping in his eyes.

"Youse lookin' for trouble, Mac?" snapped the mate belligerently.

"No, but I'll make it mighty quick!" McRennel flung back at him. "It's rotten enough for us to come robbin' and plunderin' this old fellow's poultry-yard without half-killin' him because he objects. Let him alone, Brude Haas. I'll take him to his cabin."

"An' let him spill t' beans to t' inspector," Haas snarled. "He's got a line on us an' t' boat. He's —— fool enough to get us all jugged."

Nevertheless he made no motion to interfere when McRennel stepped between them. There was a confidence of power in the swing of McRennel's shoulders that daunted the mate and called his bluff. He had sense enough to see that another word would precipitate a battle; but he did not have courage enough to meet the younger man.

"Come along, Ellison," McRennel said brusquely, starting up the slope. "I won't tramp eggs but I can't stop the others. They've got to have grub, I guess, but this is a —— of a way to get it."

Ellison followed him quickly, without looking at the eggers who had started along the slope again and were plying their heavy boots on the snowy eggs of the murres, the fragile porcelain eggs of the auks and the pink-tinted ones of the eiders.

"Have you lived here long?" McRennel asked, to take the old livyere's mind from his trouble.

"Aye," said the old fellow, staring blankly ahead. "My father an' his father lived here an' never before have the eggers come. Sometimes I gather a panful of the first layin' an' I gather the down after the young 'uns leave the nest. Some of them eiders I can call to me. Year after year they come back. For a hundred years this has been Ellison Island an' a haven for the birds of the coast. But now—now——"

The old livyere put his hands to his face as if to shut out the memory of what he had seen that morning.

"There'll be birds enough left," McRennel tried to sympathize.

"Lookit the whole coast!" the old livyere flared up again. "I mind when every ledge from Blanc Sablon to Moisie was alive with birds. I mind when the Eskimo curlew flew in clouds. There's no birds on the ledges now, an' a museum man offered me one thousand dollars for one Eskimo curlew. That comes from trampin' nests, an' shootin' the old birds, an' brutally destroyin' the prettiest things on God's earth."

"Go tell the inspector, then," McRennel said realizing that the old man spoke the simple truth. He stopped within a dozen paces of the cabin. "I mean it. I'll take my medicine an' lick the spoon if it'll help to stop this eggin'. Down north on the Labrador we don't do it this way. A vessel caught eggin' would be chased off the water. Go tell the inspector. But don't go over the hill where Brude Haas is, old man."

"The inspector is hangin' around them huntin' clubs in Anticosti," old Ellison retorted helplessly, starting away. "Only an act o' God can stop them."

Leaving the old livyere by his cabin, Denk McRennel walked slowly back to the east end of the island. Most of the aquatic rookeries were on the bare north side, where Brude Haas and the other two men were working. The south side was held by the songsters. The fine silver trills and flute-like notes of the sly Lincoln-sparrow came from the depths of thickets. The hymn of the hermit-thrush rose peacefully. Crested-pipits soared high and uttered their *oh mieux* as they dipped to the island again. A golden-eyed duck with a brood like great snow-balls, escaped providently from the slaughter over the hill, scurried diving into the surf. A brood of young cormorants, with color and appearance of India-rubber dolls, barely waddled out of McRennel's way.

He was sitting on the moss in reverie when the trio came around the landwash to the boat.

"Shake a leg, Mac!" Haas yelled at him. "Ain't hatchin' a brood, are youse?"

McRennel got up slowly and walked down to the rodney.

THE cod were striking in—banks of big, hungry five-to-twenty-pounders, white and firm-meated from the boreal, apple-green water. They fought for red-flannel bait on the jig-hook. Shoals of them pushed against the wing-leaders of the huge Whiteley trap and followed into the box. A scant half-mile of bultow-line kept a man and a boat busy around the clock.

The *Grayling* was riding in a small cove inside a rattle, but out of the whirl of tides that surged through east and west. Six miles west was Ellison Island and ten more was the main coast. The reef where the *Grayling* rode was a small island, low and bare except for eel-grass and granite boulders. On a strip of pebbly beach the drying flakes were put up and the splitting stages knocked together.

Jan Higgins, skipper, owner, rubbed his hands exultantly and swore that his boat would go into St. George's so loaded that you could wash your hands from her deck. He was a fish-eyed man of forty-five, horny-handed, brutal, avaricious, and a heartless driver of his six-man crew of wharf wolves. The treacherous harbors of the Labrador he navigated with a demijohn of rum, measuring leagues by the inches he drank. From Brude Haas, his mate, to the sniffling, "Five-Quintal" boy, he had fisted cringing obedience into his men—with the exception of Denk McRennel.

The *Grayling* had stolen the station in the rattle. Previously, year after year, Jan Higgins had turned pea-green when the *Grampus*, another cod schooner, butted into St. George's loaded to the hatches. Wherefore, that Spring before the break-up, he had inveigled the *Grampus'* mate into a drinking orgy, found out the location of the rattle, and had beaten the other ship there. And he stayed there by virtue of a three-pounder lashed to the fore-stay.

Higgins drove his short-handed crew. What time they were not in the boats hauling, they were doubling up as splitter, header, or salter. They ate six meals a day—piled plates of cod-heads and sounds flung at them with shrill imprecations by the tired ship's boy. They rose in revolt one day for the second time, wrested a precious three hours from Jan Higgins, and four of them went after a boat-load of eiders and the fresh eggs on Ellison's Island.

But the *Grayling* did not prosper. Ill-luck dogged her on that stolen reef. Slob-ice whirled down through the swift rattle at night—deep, blue growlers that broke the moorings of the Whiteley trap and swept it aside. The platform on which the salt tierces stood gave way with a crash and the half was lost. A "balancing boulder" against the low cliff-side tumbled one night, crashed to the deck, smashed two hatches, and ruined fifty quintals of cod in the hold below.

Sick of the *Grayling* crew; of their brutality and Higgins' slave-driving; of the continual cod-heads and sounds varied only when the men went egging or slaughtering; of the incessant work when his arms were covered with sea-boils—"pups" from working with fresh fish and salt—Denk McRennel cursed the wayward impulse that had led him to join the voyage.

When, after a straight twenty hours of jigging endlessly, of rowing boat-loads of fish that yielded like water and were a dead load in the choppy sea, Jan Higgins ordered him to go up the rattle to the fork and fend off slob all day into the south channel, he felt like rowing on to peaceful Ellison Island and letting the *Grayling* go to —— where it belonged.

McRennel had pushed but a slob or two into the south channel when he was startled by a husky voice calling from the belly-carders on the reef. Old Ellison had risen from behind a rock and was beckoning to him.

"I come to get you, b'y," the old livyere said, as McRennel stepped ashore beside him. "To get nobody of them but you. I've been watchin' to catch you alone, b'y."

"What for?" McRennel queried.

"You'll go back to the island with me. I come to take you. My boat's hid in the rocks."

"What for?" McRennel repeated.

"You must get away from that boat, from that rattle, b'y. An' there's no time to lose."

Old Ellison dragged a light rodney from a boulder covert and launched it hastily.

"Is the inspector goin' to get 'em?" Denk demanded. "Did you get word to him, Ellison?"

"It's a higher Law than any inspector's," answered the old livyere. "An' the hour is close. Come, b'y, an' take an oar. We must hurry. I can't make much headway with two twenty-footers."

"What's up, dad?" McRennel asked, puzzled and hesitating. "You ought to give me a hint."

"You'll know soon enough, b'y. I'm an old man an' your friend. I tell you to come with me."

McRennel looked sharply into the old livyere's countenance and saw nothing but dead earnestness there. He stepped into the boat and took both oars.

ELLISON ISLAND was like another world to Denk McRennel. During the week since he had been there, the pushing power of almost continual sun had brought the pink pyrolas and great-spurred violets up from the velvety moss. The *vie toujours* had opened its sky-blue bell-flowers. Mauve Arctic primulas on hair-stems grew luxuriantly in the rich guano soil. Along the south slope trees blossomed in red and white. The slope was a garden, compared to which the fishing schooner with its stink, sweat and galley-toil was a nightmare.

In the thickets near the island's crest, McRennel saw dozens of murres, auks, mergansers and cormorants clustering with their broods. He marveled that so many could have escaped the slaughter. The golden-eyed duck and her brood started from a juniper-covert. McRennel surmised that the raids of the eggers had driven the surviving birds to take their broods to the protecting thickets at the top of the island.

"Old man," he said suddenly and fervently, "your days here are not long. I'm goin' to St. Johns, get some one who is waiting for me there, and we'll take up this place where you leave off."

"Aye," Ellison replied. "You would be welcome, b'y. There's wood for a bigger cabin, an' soil for a garden. But lookit!"

Westward over the *Grayling* island a small white cloud no bigger than a hand wormed across the opalescent sky. It tossed and soared, dipped and twisted like a thing alive. Even as McRennel looked at the cloud the sky lost its sparkle as if a light had been turned out. The apple-green water took a dull metallic cast; the trough of the quiet wavelets seemed to burn with phosphorescence. Then a white wall, towering and weaving, flung out of sight to north and south, appeared on the horizon a dozen miles away to sea.

Followed a single minute when the island was so silent that the stillness sounded like a stroke; when the wheeling gulls did not whine and the waves in the belly-carders did not curl and hiss. A flock of golden-winged plovers, a V of blue-winged teal, and a cloud of bullet-swift black-guillemots hurtled across the island; challenging in their fleetness of wing pursuit by the ninety-mile hurricane.

The first blast hurled spindrift completely over the island, but it was a breeze compared to the wind which followed. McRennel and the old livyere in their high vantage point dropped flat on the ground and grasped the bole of a rock-rooted juniper. In a twinkling the sea split into waves that dashed high up along the landwash to the edge of the white moss. A minute after the first came the second blast, striking club-like, beating down the spindrift and the whirling funnels of water. The waves climbed higher, into the white moss forty feet above high tide. The third and fourth strokes of the gale, coming quicker and quicker together, knocked the tops off the waves, leveled the sea and boiled it like a caldron. Blasts followed blasts, quicker and quicker, till they merged into the full-lunged fury of the hurricane.

A sea-bird, spinning helplessly, vanished past McRennel. A strip of carpety moss, breaking under the lash of water, rose gustily, tore into shreds and whisked away. The juniper shrub bent flat till its branches whipped the two men lying prone on the ground. A "balancing boulder" on a rock terrace toppled and rolled several yards before it settled.

After half an hour McRennel raised his head from the moss through which he had been breathing and looked down at the water. The hurricane had *pushed* it up along the slope till it was only a hundred feet below; and was holding it steady. The sea looked like a snow-field with a glint of blue here and there. It came to him, as he saw the water high up along the slope, that by now the sea must have crept up and engulfed all the reefs and lower islands lying eastward. As he looked he grasped Ellison's arm.

"Look there!" he shouted into the old livyere's ear. "Look there! Look there!"

Like a wraith ship the *Grayling*, bare-poled except for the rag of her tan-colored mainsail, skimmed past the island close in so that they could look down upon her deck. A man lashed to the wheel had ceased struggling for a course; with exultant abandon the *Grayling* darted like a swift sea-bird toward the inevitable. So fast she went that the watchers had to jerk their heads around to see her disappear. McRennel rose to one knee, staring blankly into the white wall where the ship had vanished. A blast tugged at him till the juniper trembled.

"Lay down!" old Ellison shouted. "She'll pick you up an' throw you a hundred yards over the ledge into the sea. She can't last. Lay down."

"The Aylmet coast ledges!" McRennel shouted, pointing where the *Grayling* had disappeared; and old Ellison shouted—

"Aye!"

IT WAS late, weird evening. A setting sun shone redly through rifted banks of storm clouds. In front of the cabin, beneath the sheltering cliff on the west end of the island, the two men stood watching the waves of the *revanche* loping seaward; and stood listening to the dully roaring aftermath of the hurricane. Westward the high Aylmet coast ledges were silhouetted against a mackerel sky.

McRennel, who was dazed with the narrowness of his own call and who could not blot out the picture of the *Grayling* hurtling her crew toward the reefs, broke a silence of many minutes.

"Down north a-swilin' I've seen ice northeasters come up; an' I've fished from Chidley to the Horsechops, an' been in many a big blow off Starvation Coast. But this, the biggest of them all, never gave a sign before it struck."

"Aye, it ran faster'n the signs could spread."

"But you come an' got me," returned McRennel. "You must have known; you must have had a sign."

"There was one," said the old livyere. "I saw it at break o' day this mornin'. It never fails. I watched the *Grayling* a whiles, wonderin' why they didn't save themselves before it was too late. Then I come for you, b'y. Didn't they see a hurricane was——"

"No sign was given to 'em," McRennel interrupted. "I saw none."

"But why, lad? There was auks an' puffins an' mergansers on the island. I seen 'em before the ship came. Aye, an' hundreds of cormorants, too, with their broods, to give warnin' in time."

"You're speakin' in riddles, old man," McRennel burst out eagerly and impatiently. "The sign——?"

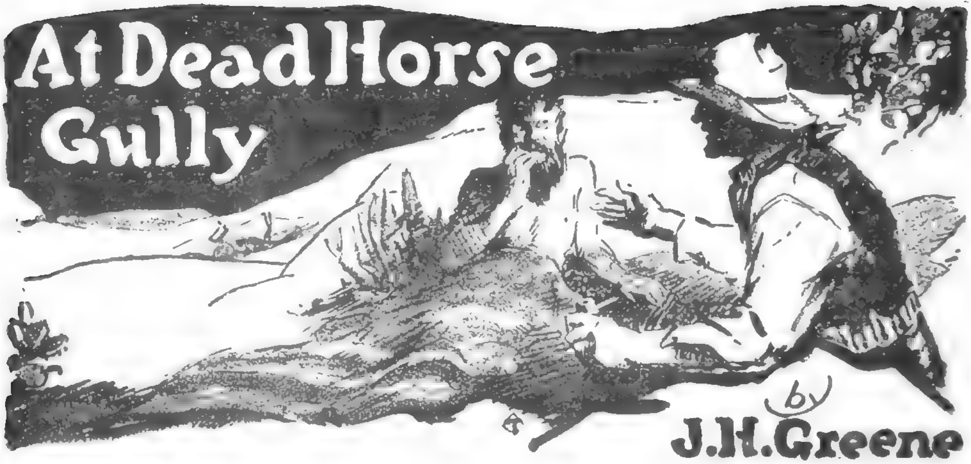
"Aye, the sign, lad. *At break o' day this mornin' all the birds began leadin' their broods to the toppest ridge of the island.*"

"But out there," McRennel said throatily, "the crew shot all the birds an' tramped the eggs, an' broke up all the rookeries, an' they had no sign. That's why——"

He pointed westward to the Aylmet coast ledges, where the low sun had painted the turreted cliffs a deep blood color.

At Dead Horse Gully

by J. H. Greene



Author of "The Spirit Availeth," and "The Joss on the Foc'sle."

"IT'S a jeweler's shop!"

Creswick did not stir from his lazy stretch by the campfire. It was after tea; he and his mate had made a long stage from the White Feather; he was as nearly tired as his wiry frame could be, but not so much from the miles as from the company of his mate.

Creswick had not taken a mate prospecting for years; he was the Australian "hatter"—the man who worked alone. But, after a disastrous "perish" on the Murchison, he had picked up Dick in a bar down at Perth. Dick had bought the drinks, Dick had money and enthusiasm; he had sold his butcher business in Sydney to join the wild rush west. His money and the drinks lured Creswick into accepting a half-share in a pack-horse outfit to try the country round Coolgardie.

They started with three months' tucker, a portable condenser to distil fresh water from the salt-pans, but they had not found enough gold to pay for their inroads on that tucker. Creswick soon found he was reverting to his life-long prejudice against mates. Dick's chatty optimism, that bubbled up with every outcrop and slumped despairingly when that outcrop proved a duffer, was getting on the more even, iron nerves of Creswick. Thirst and starvation and the chance of "perishes" were not so wearing on Creswick as keeping up with the moods of this mate.

Creswick had subsided by the fire for a pipe before rolling in his blanket. The horse, on as scant feed and water as themselves, heaved heavily from the bush. His hobbles were not clinking, his bell was only intermittent, the beast was tired, too, and not roaming to bite the spare salt-bush.

Creswick had had enough for the day, but Dick had wanted to put a shot of jelly in an outcrop he had found before tea. Creswick told him the "Reward Claim" of riches hidden in the quartz would not melt by morning, but the excitable, flash-in-the-pan new-chum had slipped off, and soon aroused Creswick from his meditation on the Milky Way by the thump of dynamite and his shout.

Creswick did not get up or turn. He was annoyed, for Dick was always finding pyrites or mundic—the deceptive new-chum gold.

"I tell you we've struck it. A jeweler's shop," repeated Dick, coming into the firelight, carrying pieces of quartz studded with gold and reeking with the fumes of the explosive.

The outcrop had been blown up to the depth of two feet. The mates held burning fire-sticks to the hole. Inside was a mass of gold that looked as if it had been poured in. The disturbed stones, loaded with gold, were heavier than quartz, granite or diorite. The hole *was* a jeweler's shop.

"First thing is to peg her out," said Dick. "Twenty-five acres on our Rights and twenty-five for a Reward Claim. How shall I peg? With this hole in the center or will we wait till we get the lay of the reef?"

"At Dead Horse Gully," copyright, 1924, by J. H. Greene.

Dick did not wait for Creswick's advice, but seizing an ax he ran out in the dark, chopping his pegs from the scrub. Creswick sneered: They were sixty miles south and east of any town, in a country where no big finds had been reported; they were not likely to be rushed by other parties in the night.

Dick came back breathless, wanting more tea, more to eat; they could afford a full meal; they were millionaires from one blast of dynamite.

Dick talked of forming companies, of stock exchange flotations, the purchase of machinery, all the operations of big mining. Creswick smoked and placidly pawed the gold. He had been at every rush on the continent for thirty years, and even outside the continent, into the fever-infested rivers of New Guinea. He had struck it, he had spent it. The thrills and despairs of the game were stale to this stoic of the desert and the bush.

"Better wait till we see if we have a reef," he said. "I'm going to bunk."

Dick did not sleep; he turned and kicked so much on his side of the fire that Creswick had to swear at him to go further away. He disturbed Creswick more than did the gasping horse.

Next morning Creswick's suspicions were proved correct; the hole was only a volcanic pocket; rich enough as far as it went, but the gold soon petered out; there was hardly enough to startle the exchanges of the world. Creswick advised Dick to pull up the pegs which would only advertise them to other parties. They would get all the gold there was before applying for a Reward Claim.

They gutted the pocket and searched for more. The other knobs of quartz were barren. Nor was there any paying alluvial, though Creswick panned all the neighboring gullies. He preferred alluvial working, for quartz mining needed a party, while the alluvial man was on his own, lord of his freehold—the fifteen square feet allowed by the regulations. But despite these failures they were rich men. The two sat by the fire on the night after the find, weighing the picked pieces in their hands. Creswick could estimate gold to half a pennyweight. They were not yet millionaires, but Dick was certain there were more pockets and they decided to stay on the ground.

Creswick was awakened next morning by the crows. These impudent prospectors of crumbs were more than usually noisy. They swarmed all over the camp, pecking at the half-empty meat tins and the crusts of damper. Dick had not done the cleaning that Creswick usually demanded. One bird actually nipped at Creswick's bare toe that protruded from his worn sock. He reached for a stone but, feeling its weight, did not throw, for he had picked up one of the pieces of gold.

"We ain't going to let this go to our heads, Dick. This gold must be kept out of sight."

But tucker was getting low and they had to go in for fresh supplies. Creswick's plan was to approach White Feather by a detour, entering from the west and returning the same way. The pocket-hole they filled; after a few days weathering it would not show signs of having been worked. The smallness of the ash-heap would prove they had not camped for long; there would be nothing to tempt wandering prospectors to try their ground.

But to dispose of the gold was their main problem. If they displayed even a small part of its amount they would start a rush, so Creswick said they would keep enough in their gold-belts to buy the supplies and bank the rest in their saddle-bags. Other banks were not to be trusted; bank officials might talk, and the least hint would empty towns on their track—a wild rush of gold-fevered men who might find other pockets and the mother reefs that fed those pockets.

Dick had packed the gold, the swags and the tucker-bags on the hobbled horse when a light whirlwind of red dust blew suddenly up into the animal's nostrils. The horse kicked, broke the rotting leather of the hobble and galloped away, frisky and speedy from having just been fed and watered. Fearful for the gold, Dick ran after him. The horse kicked up his heels and disappeared into the scrub.

"Don't chase him; steal on him, steal on him," cried Creswick.

The dust curled up in writhing red snakes; Dick ran into it and was hidden. Creswick cursed the man who did not know better than to chase a runaway.

Dick returned in an hour, but without the horse. He was hot, thirsty, exhausted, his eyes blinded, his hair red with the dust. He was raving over the possible loss of the gold. Creswick did not abuse him, but started up the gully to find the horse that carried what was even more vital than the gold—their tucker and their water-condenser.

They had camped in a low gully fringed with small trees, stunted gums, patched brambles, and patches of the pale-green salt-bush. Creswick climbed the gully, looking for hoof-tracks. There were none, for the red dust of the whirlwind had covered the gravel with a red film. What faint tracks might have been made on that hard baked sand and iron-stone gravel were now masked by the dust. Everything was so powdered it was impossible to make out a broken branch, a trodden twig, a freshly bruised bush; the tracks of the flying horse were unreadable even to a "black-fellow."

Their plight was desperate, and after a few minutes gazing at the bush he had fought so long and that had dealt him this novel and foul blow, Creswick advised their separating for the search.

"Keep your shadow over your left shoulder and listen for the beast's bell, Dick," he said.

He was listening while he spoke, but not a sound came from the arid bush except the cawing of the crows. To Dick they seemed to be laughing.

"We ought to hear his bell a mile away now that the wind has dropped. Can you hear anything?"

Dick's ears, like his eyes, were chocked; he coughed when he tried to speak, and from his dried lips dropped fervent and futile curses.

"Ten thousand pounds on the back of a horse galloping away from us!" he raved, waving his hand at the enigmatic horizon.

"Don't make speeches about it. Dries your throat. Put a pebble in your mouth to keep your tongue wet and don't forget to watch your shadow."

Creswick hated talkers in emergencies; that was his chief reason for hating mates. Silently he waved to Dick the direction he should take while he turned to take another. He heard Dick breaking noisily through the scrub and looked after him. No bushman would do that; that was not the easy lope a man could keep up all day. Dick would soon tire himself, perhaps lose himself, and for a moment Creswick thought of calling him back. For he was sending the new-chum alone into that thirsty, bewildering bush and Dick had not even his water-bag. Neither had Creswick his, but Creswick was a bushman with a camel's capacity and a compass in his head. Creswick's contempt for his mate forbade him to be easy. The fellow needed to be broken in to the bush. A little of its loneliness, a touch of its terrors might make a man of him. If he came near to a perish Creswick could go after him, but if the horse was not found they would probably both perish. The horse came first.

Creswick strode over hills, down gullies, seeking for signs in every disturbed stone, every clump of scrub. He kept his ears strained over the brooding silence, his eyes noting his direction, the shapes of the hills, peculiarities in the trees, while his feet kept count of the miles he traveled.

Toward noon something unusual appeared hanging from a low tree. He knew it was his swag before he came to it, as a man knows his own boots. Dick never could fold a swag neatly. It must have been torn from the horse's back as he galloped through the scrub. There were hoof-prints under the bush and beyond, but no sign of Dick's swag or the saddle-bags with the gold. The condenser, which had been strapped to the outside of the swag, he found close by.

He decided to return. There was a little tucker still unpacked in camp but scarcely any water, so water was the first thing needed. He needed it now; Dick would need it more; so shouldering his swag and carrying the condenser he returned to camp, and on a bee-line for he had watched his shadow, and had taken care to make allowance for the instinct to walk in a circle.

He arrived at sunset. The camp was deserted. No answer came to his *coo-ees*. The two almost dry water-bags dripped from a tree. He filled the condenser-boiler with brine from the salt-pan, made tea and cakes and then set the billy where it would keep warm for his mate. He was beginning to worry about him, to feel a little remorseful for trusting him alone. He climbed a hill to *coo-ee* into the advancing shadows of the west, toward the angry sunset. The bush did not answer, so he piled all the logs he could on the fire, hoping the blaze would be a beacon for Dick. He lay down, certain that in the morning he would have to look for a lost mate as well as for a strayed horse. It was no use searching at night. That big fire would be of more help.

"Blasted fool! Why didn't he stick to his butcher business? Blasted fool! Blasted fool!" he kept repeating as he listened once more before turning to sleep.

The bush was as silent and unpitying as the stars; not a sound could he hear but the fluttering of the flames, the falling of cinders.

"Poor beggar," muttered Creswick as he fell asleep.

HE WAS up at dawn and, after a spare breakfast, packed his swag and the condenser. The search for the horse might be a long one and he did not want to have to come back again. He should go after Dick, he should be thinking only of Dick, but there was a horse, not in the best condition, loaded with saddle-bags and gold, perhaps doing a worse perish than Dick's.

"He'll have to chance it," he thought.

If Dick was a bushman he would know horses came before men; if he was a fully blooded prospector he would say, "Get the gold first"; Dick had been but one night in the bush, while Creswick's perish on the Murchison had been a five days' agony.

But in case Dick should return to this camp, and go out of his mind at finding it deserted, Creswick had to devise some means of letting him know his mate would return. It was not easy to think of a signal that a man, half-crazed with thirst and a night alone in the bush, would immediately notice. Creswick had no writing material in his swag. Dick had, but Dick's swag was on the horse. Dick would think he had been deserted; Dick could not read bushmen's ways any more than he could read the bush; Dick could only read print.

With fragments of the white and gray quartz which that lucky, or unlucky, shot of dynamite had torn from the earth, Creswick framed in big letters the word, "DIG" on a clear patch of sand. Just below this he dug a hole and buried in it some of the cakes and dried apples wrapped in a piece of his blanket tied to it like a little flag. Surely, he thought, even a raw new-chum raving for food would see and understand this. Dick's water-bag was hanging from a tree, the lower corner was barely damp. Creswick poured into it what water he could spare, enough to resuscitate a parched man. Creswick had done "perishes" on less.

But suppose, he thought, Dick should try to follow him? To prevent this Creswick spelled out another message—the word, "WAIT"—in the same lettering. The quartz chips, the little flag, the mound over the food made the space look like a grave. The crows were cawing around him, hopping from the trees, waiting for his departure to raid the camp. He had buried the food under stones so that they could not reach it. But the bush was a grave of dead men, of blasted hopes, of futile ambitions; and the crows were its ghouls. He gave way to this thought for merely a second; he was accustomed to battle with despondency, but the bush demands defiant indifference, so he turned away sturdily to find his mate, or the horse, or whatever the bush chose to give him.

After a long, hot, exhausting day he found the dead carcass of the horse on the edge of the salt-pan. The thirsty beast had been drawn by his instinct to the damp clay though the water below was thick and bitter. Ants swarmed over the sprawling body; only death could bring life out of the sand.

The crows were gathering to assist the ants. There was no need to certify the death of the horse, and Creswick's next thought was for the saddle-bags. They were empty; the gold was gone.

For a moment Creswick was staggered. He wildly searched the surrounding sand. There were traces of the horse rolling over in his agony. He found Dick's swag a few yards away. He was certain the horse in his anguish had tried to rid himself of his burden, as perishing men strip themselves of their clothes. But there was no sign of the gold. It had been wrapped in canvas; not a strip of canvas was in sight.

Creswick tried to lift the horse, thinking that perhaps the gold had slipped under its carcass. He saw a darker red stain in the sand, a dried pool of blood, and a wound in the horse's forehead. It was a bullet wound; the horse had not died of thirst; he had been shot. Then Creswick reached the appalling conclusion—somebody must have found and taken the gold.

So far Creswick had been fairly philosophic over the loss of the gold. It would have been spent anyway; over the bars in Perth or on a bigger spree back East; on the purchase of shares in some wild-cat mine; and the remnants on a fresh outfit and a trip back to the bush again. That had always been his way. Creswick could not stay long on city pavements; the dissipation always grew a little dreary; he had to come back to the camp-fires and the long, lonely miles; to keep tramping till the last spadeful was turned and the last nugget unearthed.

But that gold he had slaved for should be held by another man aroused all his fighting spirit, all the youth that had been nearly burnt out in the bush. The robbery was more stimulating to him than a meal of fresh mutton, or all the bars in the East.

One of two things was certain. Either the dying horse had been met and shot by some stray prospector—or by Dick. The place was far from where Dick had started, but Dick would not keep to a straight course. He would not know enough to camp for the night and wait for the sun to give him a guiding shadow. Dick might have rambled anywhere. He might have come on the dying horse, put it out of its misery, and taken the gold hoping to—what? Creswick asked himself.

Dick might be trying to find his way back to his mate with the gold, or he might be stealing off with it for himself. Dick was a city man, a shop-keeper. To Creswick, shop-keepers were thieves who robbed gold-lined prospectors; cities were dens of such.

Then again the finder might not have been Dick at all. Creswick searched the ground again, taking it foot by foot in a circle round the horse. He found nothing but a few hoof-marks in the soft clay near the edge of the pan; the heavy depressions made by the animal trying to roll free of the saddle. Creswick again examined the débris of the pack and Dick's swag. He found a waistcoat under the horse's hind-quarters. He remembered how Dick could never get over the shopman's idea that he ought to wear a waistcoat. He was sure Dick had been wearing that waistcoat when they had started to track the horse. It had not come out of the swag. Dick had certainly been there.

Creswick lighted a fire and boiled his billy for a sup, a bite, a smoke, and to plot a plan of action. In one way he was glad it was Dick, and not some outsider, who had taken the gold. An outsider, even if honest, might put up a claim to some share of it. The warden might allow that claim. But Dick's finding it was different. Half that gold was Creswick's who, on cooler thinking, did not believe his mate would rob him, unless crazed by thirst. Anyway he could find him as he had found the horse; he would run him down—if he could only be sure where to run.

So he started after a city-bred mate who did not know how to save himself, who talked back at the bush, and wore himself out in hurry and words. Creswick carried a swag, light in tucker but loaded with the condenser, his tools, his water-bag—altogether a sixty pounds' "Matilda." Dick had only his clothes and the fifteen pounds of gold. The odds were on Creswick.

Creswick crept on slowly, exhaustively looking for traces, *coo-eeing* at intervals. The bush gave no sign or answer. From every rise he peered into the implacable dead face of the country; he called to its vacant emptiness; he stared at its wide stillness, searching for something moving, something alive. He once saw smoke and was for heading toward it when he remembered that Dick never had matches. He would not light a fire in the daytime if he had, for he had no billy to boil. That smoke meant men—mates—who might find Dick before him, find him dead perhaps and claim his gold. Creswick quickened his gait and searched more keenly.

On the top of an iron-stone hill he thought he heard more than crows or the pounding of the blood in his ears. He turned slowly, looking all round the horizon to make sure, knowing he had done a long tramp on little food and water and that he was nearing the state when men see bar-rooms in the skies and hear long-perished men calling from dead timber.

But it was no delusion. He was hearing a faint *coo-ee*. On a brighter sand-patch he saw the moving speck of a man. He ran towards it. The call came louder; it was a choked cry rather than a *coo-ee*. At the next rise he saw the man was Dick and that he was stark-naked. He was stumbling over the sand, running in a ring; a man reduced by thirst and terror to an elemental animal. He fell as Creswick reached him.

"Dick, boy, Dick, old man. Matey, you're all right now."

Creswick poured the tepid water from his bag over Dick's parched and protruding tongue. Dick was in a pitiable condition, torn with brambles, blistered with the sun. He opened his eyes with weak recognition. He tried to speak, but his swollen tongue would not let him articulate.

"Gold—gold—" he seemed to be trying to say.

"Never mind the gold, matey. Lie still till I make tea."

Creswick carried him tenderly to a shade, lighted a fire and put on the billy. Gurgles came from the stricken man; his fingers were digging in the sand.

"Gold — buried — buried —" Creswick thought he was trying to say.

"All right, mate. We'll get it when you're able to move."

Creswick had, for a few moments, forgotten the gold. The sight of that sun-stricken, desert-hounded man sinking into the ant-heaps, chased by the crows waiting for him to be still, reminded Creswick that a perishing man was always a mate. He had thought of nothing but keeping that mate alive. Now he remembered that he had seen no discarded clothes near Dick, no strewn fragments of gold. He believed Dick had buried the gold somewhere; his last sane deed before delirium struck him. It was the right thing to do; his mate was no fool. He carefully fed him, watched him, covered him with his blanket and sat by him. The effort to communicate what he had done with the gold seemed to have exhausted Dick; he sank into a deep sleep.

It was now dark. Heavy feet trampled out of the bush and a tall man came into the firelight. His boots were new, the shine still on them; he wore a flannel shirt with all its buttons working, and he must have shaved within a week.

"Saw your camp-fire, chaps. First we've struck for a week. Hello, what's up?" asked the man, as Creswick tried to stop him from waking Dick.

"Mate just done a perish," whispered Creswick, not at all pleased at the advent of this dandy prospector.

But the newcomer was very sympathetic and bent over the exhausted man.

"Let's carry him over to my camp. We're Watkins and party. One of us is a doctor and we carry spare clothes, brandy, and Bovril."

The stranger took charge. Creswick was not at all willing. He would do anything to save his mate, give his last handful of flour, but he wanted to do it himself. This man with his swell outfit annoyed him. Creswick, the battle-ax of the bush, was shy before fair-spoken city men in fine raiment. With this native desire to run and hide in a hole, Creswick, now that his mate had a fighting chance to live, began to think of the gold. In his condition Dick had probably not hidden it very cunningly; it might be found by Watkins and party.

"I thought of letting him sleep," was, however, the utmost opposition he could show.

"You look pretty far gone yourself. Come along. We can spare you some tucker. You take his head, and keep it high."

After a mile or so in the starlight, slowly covered so as not to jar their burden, Creswick saw a big blaze, new white tents, several men moving in the smoke, horses beyond, and the humps of two squatting camels. One of the men wore a turban. Creswick saw he was an Afghan.

It was more than a party, it was an expedition; and Creswick hated expeditions and camels. These ungainly aliens made expedition possible; they were daily reducing the amount of unexplored territory—the deserts belonging to the Creswicks, whose only possessions were the unknown, the unmapped blanks out back.

A stout little man bobbed up from the fire, asked a few snappy questions, and immediately ordered Dick to be laid so that the firelight fell on his face.

"Get the brandy and the medicine chest. This man should go to a hospital at once. Got a horse?" he asked Creswick.

"No. Our horse is dead."

"I can take him into Coolgardie on a camel," said Watkins. "Abdul!"

The tall man who had helped Creswick carry Dick strode over to give his orders to the Afghan.

"Now, my man, get off your feet and let me feel your pulse," said the doctor to Creswick.

Creswick refused to lie down or be examined; he said he was all right. He even refused a nip of brandy until he had something to eat. Tea was better to think on and he had to think quickly. His loose-tongued mate was being strapped on a camel to be taken away from him. Creswick watched the operation till Dick's closed eyes opened on the glowering figure in the firelight.

"Gold—gold—" he babbled again.

"All right, matey. I'll look after it. You are going to rest up a bit. You just lay back and do nothing."

It was the utmost Creswick could do in the way of warning Dick not to talk; for the mention of the gold had made Watkins turn in his saddle, brought the cook from the fire, and for a moment halted the kind attentions being given to Dick. Even the eyes of the hook-nosed Abdul flashed out of the dark.

Watkins rode off with Dick. Creswick had lost his mate who, on the verge of delirium, might at any moment tell of the gold.

But Creswick's hosts would not let him leave till they had fed him and burdened him with all he could carry of flour and tinned goods. He was a hero, a man who had found a perishing mate on a handful of flour and a nearly dry water-bag.

"On gold?" asked the doctor.

Creswick had been waiting for some such question, some such prospecting of a prospector, but nobody but a new-chum would have been so baldly direct. Such information is only for mates, and Creswick had no mate now, and wanted none. Did they think their gifts gave them sharing rights?

"Not now," he answered guardedly, "all we've got for six months."

He pulled out the small piece he and Dick had kept out to purchase their supplies. It was passed from hand to hand.

"Got that slug two hundred miles north—near Kurnalpi," said Creswick.

They wanted him to stay the night, but Creswick said he would rather go back to camp. Thanking the party for their tucker, he started to go.

"Where is your camp?" asked the doctor "we're going to hang round here for awhile. We will let you have news of your mate."

Creswick, suspicious of every question, waved his hand directly south.

"About a mile back there. Don't think I'll stay though. It ain't even tucker ground. I'll pass by in a day or two and ask yer about Dick. S'long."

Shouldering his bags Creswick tramped out of the firelight, making all the noise he could. He walked due south; but after a few hundred yards, turned on his track, left his baggage and, under cover of the bush, crawled carefully back to the camp of the Watkins party. As he came close he heard excited voices; he saw an eager group round the fire listening to the doctor.

"The fellow lied. It was not a slug. It was reef gold, worn smooth by being carried in his pocket. Bits of quartz were sticking to it. And it was not Kurnalpi gold either. He is squatting on a big find or I am no geologist. We'll wait till Watkins comes back and then peg alongside this lock-jawed hatter."

Creswick had heard enough. The doctor had found him out; the Watkins party was smelling his gold; he had to find it, and find it first. He picked up his bags and, steering by the Southern Cross over his left shoulder, went due west.

IN ALL his experience, from panning in North Queensland, where black-fellows' spears hissed out of the grass, to delirious dippings in malarial Papua, Creswick had never undertaken such frenzied gold seeking.

He made his camp near the dead horse. The gold must have been planted near that. From the now reeking and ant-infested carcass he explored in all directions. Every time he came near the horse, with a stone he sent up and off a cloud of the crows. He could not stand their chattering.

He hardly stopped to eat or drink. For at any moment the Watkins party might invade him and join in the search. His work was no longer the patient testing of sand and gravel, but a hurried questioning, almost a demoniac digging of every heap, every pile of sand, every rise that looked artificial; for he was exasperated by the certainty that the gold was there. He never pegged, for he had nothing to peg for, and he shifted his ground every hour. Pegs would confine him to one spot, and he roamed out in widening circles from the dead horse. He even tried the ground under the horse.

On the second day he had tried, or at least closely examined every foot of hill, gully, sand or gravel-patch within a mile radius. The gold was surely within that. He had found Dick's revolver, abandoned a few hundred yards from the horse. Dick must have been far gone in weakness to abandon that treasure of the new-chum. Dick must have buried the gold long before he had torn off his clothes.

Worn to a skeleton, Creswick lay by his fire on the evening of the third night. Beside him the condenser bubbled its fresh drops for the morrow. He smoked faster than his scant supply of tobacco allowed, gazing up at the stars, mentally raking with his fingers every inch of the acres around him. He would have liked to work all night; he had to drive himself to sleep;

for that wealth that he must have just missed, that he must have walked over, kept his brain guessing and his heart pounding—kept him alive.

After a little sleep he awoke even before the crows. In the weird wan hour before dawn he heard faint voices, he saw a camel padding toward him, and on it he recognized the lank figure of Watkins.

"Where are your pegs?" called Watkins.

Creswick staggered to his feet out of his forced sodden half-sleep. He had not pegged out even an alluvial claim. Not a foot of this land was his. Stupidly he tried to put sticks in the ground.

"Peg away, anywhere, doctor, the country is open," called Watkins.

Creswick saw the party, he heard axes cutting pegs; he saw Abdul and the others driving them. Creswick was being dispossessed of the land he had slept on, that held his gold. Awake now, and almost demented, he tried to argue, he cursed, he threatened.

"It's no use, my man," said the doctor, "you can't keep us out. We claim twenty-five acres. I don't blame you sending us off on that wild-goose chase south. But now it is our innings. So pack and shift. Your mate died on the way in. Watkins buried him. But from his talk, we think this place worth a try and so does the mob behind us."

The doctor waved his hand to the bush in his rear. Out poured men from the scrub, emerging like ants, on foot, on horseback, on camels; the rush of the fagged but keen and eager gold-hunters that had trailed after the Watkins party. Pegs were being driven in, marking out claims up to the Watkins boundary. Canvas gleamed, fires smoked; the crows flew away scared by the voices that disturbed the desert; the choppings, the shovelings, the pannings, the dry-blowing, the drilling, of alluvial seekers and quartz testers.

When the sun was up a thousand men were pegged and working. Not a strip of land was left between the claims; strips that would be worked out in a day were taken up; and of that land Creswick did not own one inch.

Creswick, the dispossessed, wandered from claim to claim. Some of these men would light on his gold. He haunted every hole, every tailing-heap; he started when a pebble fell with extra heaviness into a dish, when dynamite thudded and picks raked the quartz.

But an alluvial field has to give something quickly to prove itself a field; quartz can command time; and Dead Horse Gully was not yielding tucker to the mostly ill-fitted crowd that had poured into the bush on the heels of the more amply provided Watkins Party. These disillusioned men, mostly the sweepings of Eastern cities, mostly easily discouraged, like Dick, were all quick to proclaim that this field, given to the world by a dying prospector, was a duffer, a fraud. Some of the more bitter, mostly those who had risked the least, were ready to avenge their disappointment on Creswick. He, the mate of the original prospector, was walking about laughing at them; he had his pile banked away in Coolgardie; he should have his ears cut off and be turned adrift with a pint of water—West Australia's idea of lynching.

Creswick was watching a man finger the dirt caught in the ripples of his shaker. The man was cursing the barrenness of his search. There was not even a pennyweight slug.

"I'm full up, Bill," he called to the man in the next claim. "I'll have to go back and work for wages. I've just got enough tucker to take me in."

He saw Creswick standing by him staring at his worthless heap of pebbles.

"You get off my claim. You'd spoil any man's luck," he said.

Creswick said nothing and stepped off the superstitious unlucky man's claim. But in doing so he merely stepped on to another's. The owners of this, equally unlucky, ordered him off, too. Creswick was bandied from claim to claim, at times with sarcasm, at times with actual abuse. His tight-lipped control began to loosen; when the owner of a patch three feet by six shoved him, he knocked the man over his shaker. The man rose, a fight was called at once on the most level bit of the turned-over ground, but Creswick did not wait for preliminaries. He sailed into this crowd, striking at each and all, at this maddening many that had driven him from his field, that would find his gold.

Creswick was tough, strong, and cunning with his fists and feet; this was a rough and tumble, calling for elbows, knees and butting heads. A man tried to haul off the men piling on top of Creswick, calling for fair play. Creswick threw off the light-weight city men for a second, and knocked this man down, too. He immediately joined the attackers.

"Let him be, let him up. Can't you see the man is insane?"

Creswick partly heard this as he was helped to his feet by the doctor. Watkins and he had beaten the heap off Creswick with their shovels.

"Suppose he did lie about the gold here? Suppose his mate lied? Can't you see he is a poor hatter, more crazy than most hatters? I am a doctor. I say, leave him be."

Creswick, battered as he had been into the dust, saw himself surrounded by curious eyes and shrinking faces.

"You've been too long in the bush, my man," said the doctor. "You need a spell or a spree in town. If you haven't the money, I'll pay your fare down and give you a letter to a friend of mine who will help you."

"Lock him up, doctor. Put him in a strait-jacket. He ain't fit to be loose."

These cries, shrill with savagery, with fear, with anger, even with shame, roared over the field.

"Crazy, am I?" shouted Creswick back. "I'm Creswick, the oldest prospector on the field. I know more'n any of you. I've prospected from the Snowy River to the Gulf. Who are you to tell me what I am? Crazy, eh? I lied, did I? My mate lied, did he? I tell yer the gold is here and you don't know enough to find it. You'll never find it, but I will. New-chums—geologists—experts—expeditioners—what the blazes do you know anyway?"

Watkins tried to lead Creswick away. The now thoroughly unrestrained Creswick who had never spoken so many consecutive words in his life, gave Watkins a back-shove into a tailing-heap. The crowd, angered again, rushed forward; there was a call for ropes to bind the maniac.

"Don't touch him," called the doctor, "don't exasperate him. He is harmless if you leave him alone."

Creswick was shaping up for a fresh bout with Watkins, but the long wiry Queenslander, as big as and much younger than Creswick, stood back rubbing his hurt jaw. He would not fight. Nobody would fight. Creswick faced the fat little doctor who did not lift a hand or move an eye-lash. Creswick dropped his fists, staggered to his camp and fell by his fire.

CRESWICK sat by his fire. No one came near him; men went wide to avoid his camp which he had been compelled to shift many times, driven by the diggers. It was now on an unworked corner of the Watkins lease, on scratched and barren ground. The dead horse was near him; it had followed him, for the carcass had been tossed hither and thither as he had been; it too had been in the way of impatient shovels. No one troubled to bury it.

Voices came from the dusty dusk; men were leaving even at night-fall, abandoning this unlucky field.

Creswick, exhausted from his fight, from the long puzzling over his lost gold, hoped they would go soon—these mates that his dead mate had forced on him with his loose tongue. The work they had done on the field would lessen the area he would have to dig.

Over the heaps came a man; it was the doctor. Creswick was as near fearing this man as he could fear anything. It was the doctor who had found out his lie, who had diagnosed him mad, who had taken the anger from his clenched fist with a smile and a masterful manner.

"We're going," said the doctor as if nothing had happened. "We want a man to hang on to this lease. One will be enough. You can have three pounds a week and your tucker. The only work will be puttering round with a spade if any jumpers come round. You can say the other men are out for water."

"Don't want your job," growled Creswick. "Leave me alone, will yer?"

The doctor did not answer at once and Creswick dropped his gaze into the fire.

"If you don't feel fit for the job and would like a spell in town, you can have a lift on one of our camels."

"Don't want a lift."

Creswick heard the doctor go. The fellow wanted to strap him on a camel, lure him down to Perth and lock him in some asylum. The cries of the mob to put him in a strait-jacket were still in the ears of Creswick.

He threw more sticks on the fire; dreaming over a fire was the next best thing to prospecting. There are always slugs, nuggets, reefs and golden pockets in glowing cinders.

He heard steps again, and looked up to see the doctor and Watkins carrying a bag of flour, boxes of tinned goods, tucker of all kinds, which they piled by his blankets.

"We've got to lighten our packs to carry specimens, and this grub——"

"Don't want your —— grub," cried Creswick, savagely rising.

Watkins recoiled; the lean, ragged, gaunt, wild-eye prospector was pitiable but terrifying. The doctor did not recoil; he smiled as if he recognized the ultimate incarnation of the indomitable spirit of *Australia Infelix*, *Australia Deserta*.

"Please yourself. It's yours if you need it. We're off. Good night and good luck."

In the morning the unusual clutter of the crows awakened Creswick. They had returned to the deserted field in flocks. Their heavy wings flew across the silvery dawn like black eye-spots of sickness.

Creswick did not rise with his usual alacrity. He lay staring at the crows, and at the tucker left by the doctor. It was enough for six months. He had not touched it but he would have to. If not, he might as well lie there till the life dried out of him. Creswick had sometimes wondered if that would be his end. Now, weak and worn with the maddening enigma of the lost gold, he wondered if that were not the better way; to go out on the sand, with his face to the sky, to rest forever, or to wake, perhaps, and go on prospecting on richer fields round the Golden Gates.

The crows made a horrible racket and he sat up. They were swarming over the tucker; a tin of something was leaking. Clouds of them dropped from the sky over the tucker, over the horse. The carcass fell in; they bit at the bones. He saw the beaks pecking at something gray that was not bone. It was a piece of gray flannel.

Tingling with the instinct that had been born of a thousand hardships, Creswick sprang to his feet as if he had been suddenly given wings. He ran to the horse; the crows rose like an explosion of black-powder smoke opening some pocket. He tugged at the flannel, it came from the belly of the horse and it was heavy, for wrapped inside it was the canvas covering the lost gold.

SMILES away the Watkins Party was hailed by a wild *coo-ee* from their rear. A man appeared running, yelling, waving his arms. The doctor recognized Creswick, and Watkins reached for a Winchester.

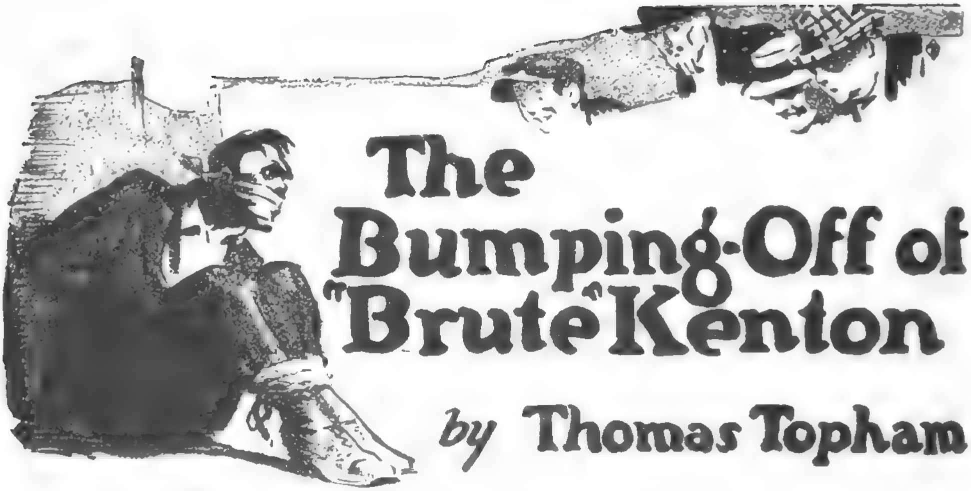
"Running amuck! See his knife," said Watkins.

Something did glitter in Creswick's hand, but the doctor saw, in time to prevent Watkins from firing, that the glitter was yellow.

"Wasn't crazy, see! Got it all. It was in the horse," gasped Creswick. "I don't want it. It's my mate's. Find his family, let them have it. If you can't, you take it, mates. That's what you have been to me —mates, by ——. And I'll hold your lease for you against all the jumpers in W. A. and help you to find more pockets."

Of course they would not accept his gold. It belonged to Creswick and party. It was a mere fly-speck to the money behind their syndicate, to what the syndicate was looking for.

"And I thought Dick was a fool," Creswick concluded, "a new-chum that knew nothing. I was the fool. Thought I knew everything. I forgot he was a butcher. He couldn't have planted the gold in a better place."



The Bumping-Off of "Brute" Kenton

by Thomas Topham

Author of "Captain Tookle Tames a Queen," "The Rescue Valiant," etc.

"BRUTE" KENTON sifted into the detectives' room at headquarters in as inconspicuous a manner as his large bulk would permit. He pulled his hat over his eyes and kept his face turned sidewise as he signed the register indicating that he was ready for assignment. This duty performed, he sidled unostentatiously over to an obscure corner and sat down rather awkwardly and apparently painfully, pulled a newspaper from his pocket and hid himself behind its enveloping folds.

Brute was a wreck. One eye was almost closed, the other badly discolored. There was skin off his nose, his cheeks and his chin. Divers "abrasions, lacerations and contusions," as a police hospital report would have put it, adorned his countenance. One ear was plastered to his head with adhesive tape, his great knuckles were skinned, and around his wrists deep red, raw marks showed. He limped perceptibly as he walked.

The captain of detectives winked one eye slowly as Brute took his seat. Despite his name, and he had earned it, Brute Kenton was not unpopular on the force. He was a brute and invaluable in some ways. He would willingly, almost gaily, fling himself in the face of death, take desperate odds without quailing, and then, just as willingly, turn around and beat up an unoffending little man who had trodden on his toe by accident. He did not know what mercy meant. He asked no quarter and he gave none.

No thug, no crook, no denizen of the underworld but dreaded to fall into his hands. He broke them without a qualm, and so cleverly did he do it that never had anything been pinned on him that would stick. Only once did his enemies come near it, and that was when, at the head of a squad of detectives, he raided the hang-out of Charlie Mantel.

Brute had been unable to hang anything on Charlie until that raid. Charlie, seeing them coming, foolishly shot once in mere bravado and slammed the door. The detectives riddled the door and when they broke in, Brute at the head, Charlie was lying on the floor.

"Don't shoot, men," he called. "I'm dying."

"You're a long time doing it," said Brute calmly, and pumped five bullets into the dying man's body.

After that the nickname of "Brute" stuck and was openly used. Even the hardened police reporters were shocked. The story was whispered about, but none of the detectives who were on the raid dared back it up. Anyway, Charlie Mantel's passing was a relief to the chief, and while there was some talk of an investigation it was dropped after Brute had bagged two bank hold-ups in a running battle.

When the captain of detectives winked

I ambled casually over in Brute's direction and sat down.

"Kind of bunged up, aren't you, Brute?" I asked, with what I hoped was sympathy in my voice.

Brute looked suspiciously at me with his one good eye. For some unaccountable reason Brute liked me and occasionally, if he had a grouch that boiled over, he would talk.

Right then he seemed to have a grouch and to feel humiliated, a combinaiton that augured well.

"Yeah, I'm bunged up—proper," Brute replied.

He looked back at his paper uneasily, but he wasn't reading.

"Uh-huh," I grunted. "In a fight? He sure must have been a pretty good-sized guy."

Brute shot me a malevolent, one-eyed glance.

"Naw, it wasn't a guy," he said. "A lady done it."

I was shocked but I expressed only polite surprize.

"I presume then, that the lady is now in durance vile," I remarked.

"Not by a —— sight she ain't in durance vile," exploded Brute, "an' she won't never be if they pick on me to put 'er there."

"Too much for you, eh?" I jabbed at him.

Brute laid his paper down with a movement that apparently was painful.

"Son," he rebuked me sternly, "they ain't none of 'em too much for me. You might's well have the straight of this ruckus, else you'll get it handed to you all mixed up."

"Of course," I said, "I've heard a little here and there, garbled very probably, but no one tipped me off that you'd been run through a sausage machine."

"Garbled? I'll bet it was garbled. Ain't nobody knows the truth of it but me," replied Brute bitterly.

"Brute," I said consolingly, "you've got something on your mind. Spit her out and relieve your feelings."

"I'll spit 'er out," snapped Brute, still with bitterness. "I'd like to tell the whole wide world what a rotten deal I got. Settle back there, kid, an' I'll give you the low-down on the rottenest break a honest, hard-workin' dick ever got."

I settled.

I WAS a-settin' right here the other mornin' (began Brute) when the chief sends for me. I go down, expectin' something easy, roundin' up a bunch of dips or bandits or gunmen.

"Howdy Brute," says the big un, real pleasant for him. "Know Maggie Dolan?"

"No," says I.

"Know of her?" he shoots back.

"I've heard of her," I tell him, not any too easy in my mind, because Maggie Dolan's been a touchy subject around this joint for some time.

"So've I," snapped the chief. "Some of these boobs around here say she don't exist—that she's a myth. Well, she ain't, an' I'm tired of such buck-passin'. She's tied up with that Spignola outfit. I'm pretty certain she's queen of the bandits the newspapers is hollerin' about. Anyway, Spignola's gettin' too gay. He's due for a fall an' a stretch over the road."

"Got anything on Maggie?" I asked the chief. "Got a warrant?"

"No," comes back the big boss. "Just want her brought in, not pinched. Want to talk to her an' get some information. Think you can do it?"

Well, I ain't goin' to admit nothin', so I says:

"Sure. That all, chief?" just like it's a cinch, an' out I go.

Spignola's got a pretty good pipe-line, I'll say that much for him, because I ain't been out of the station more than a half-hour when he knows something's up, an' the word goes down the line—

"Bump-off Brute."

Sure, I knew it. A friend tips me an' says I better lay off Spignola an' report back that Maggie Dolan can't be found.

But that bumpin'-off business don't worry me none. They've tried that before. I just sifted down there easy-like on the blind chance Maggie'd be where stool-pigeons say she hung out. Mind you, so far as I really knew, there wasn't no Maggie Dolan; lots of the bulls didn't believe in her an' some of the dicks. It had got to be kind of the usual thing to say: "Maggie Dolan done it," or "Maggie Dolan was at the bottom of that job," till it was almost a joke. An' every time an officer'd look for her she'd be out.

But this time Maggie was there like a ton of dynamite. They'd laid a trap for me an' I fell into it like a big boob. An' my hunch was workin' too, for I had the feelin' it's all wrong the minute I laid eyes on her. Too easy. She's a frail-lookin' little dame, pale but pretty.

"What you want?" she asks, openin' the door a crack when I pounded on it.

"Maggie Dolan," I say, stickin' my foot in the crack.

"That's me," she says, not openin' the door any further.

"Chief wants to see you," I say, surprized, because I'd been expectin' a lotta trouble locatin' her. "'Taint a pinch. Just wants to talk to you."

"Oh," says Maggie, "I ain't done nothin'. Just tell the chief that for me."

"Nothin' doing," I come back. "You trot along now with me like a good girlie an' tell him yourself."

"I won't," she shoots back at me an' tries to slam the door, but of course my foot stopped that.

"You sassy little thing," I kid her, kinda peeved but not real mad, an' I put my shoulder against the door. She held it, so I give a shove an' in I go, sudden. Boner number one. There stands Spignola himself with a gat an' a broad grin. Maggie slammed the door, an' bingo! I'm caught neat.

I made a swipe at Spignola's gun an' knocked it outa his hand before he could croak me, but Maggie comes down over my dome with a sap-stick an' I'm out. That's how I get this terrible black eye. The end of the sap done it.

The next thing I hears is Spignola sayin'—

"Guess I'd better bump him off before he comes to," an' I feel a cold gun-muzzle at the side of my head.

"Good night," I says to myself, wonderin' if I'd hear the gun go off or the bullet would do it's dirty work first.

"Stop! Stop!" screeches Maggie, an' Spignola don't pull the trigger. I wisht afterward he had.

"Aw, what's the matter?" Spignola asks, still keepin' the gun ready.

"Spig," says Maggie, "I've just thought of something. If we croak this bird off up here they'll nab us sure. We'd better take him off somewheres, an' then you can do what you please, but I ain't got no ambition now to be one of these beautiful lady-murderers vampin' juries."

"Aw rats," says Spignola, "better bump him off while we got the chanct. Here goes."

"Don't!" yells Maggie. "Do you hear me? We can bump off a big boob like him any time, but this ain't the place to do it."

Spignola growls around some but he don't croak me, an' Maggie ties up my arms an' my legs an' gags me. See them marks? Cut almost to the wrist-bones by a strap. I couldn't make a fight. I'm limp as a rag an' still kinda dazed from that crack over the bean.

Spignola's one of these brutal guys an' he enjoys himself kickin' me an' he don't skimp the job none. I think for a while I've got a coupla ribs busted loose.

"Go down an' git a taxi, Spig," directs Maggie, "an' I'll watch this poor fish. He ain't quite come to yet."

"Use your car," growled Spig. "It's right here."

"I will not," says Maggie. "It might be confiscated or something. Go on, get that taxi. Get Bill, if you can, but you're a cheap kind of a gunman if you can't bluff out a taxi-driver."

Spignola shuts up an' goes. I don't know why then, but I do later after I've known Maggie longer. He comes back with another guy an' they carry me down to the taxi, draggin' me fierce down the steps. The taxi is hauled up in a little courtyard in the back with an alley leadin' out. They dump me in the bottom, foldin' me up all kinda ways to make me fit, an' cover me with a robe. Then Maggie hops in.

"Now, bo," says Spignola to the taxi-guy, who's scared stiff, "you drive us right out to the suburbs, a nice lonesome place, an' we'll unload this cargo. At the first sign of you tryin' to gyp me I'll croak you, an' if I don't some of my handy guys will. Understand?"

"They'll pinch me," begs the guy, tearful. "They'll think I done it, whatever it is you're a-goin' to do. They always git the taxi-driver."

"Naw they won't," says Spig, "but what if they do? It's better'n bein' dead, ain't it? On your way."

That settles the taxi-guy. He knows Spignola an' the gang he runs. Spig climbs in, steppin' careless all over me, an' off we start. I'm tryin' all the time to work my wrists loose, but them straps jest dig in deeper. My feet git a little loose but I can't git 'em clear, doubled up like I am. Pretty soon we're stuck in the traffic.

Spignola bawls the taxi-guy out for

comin' that way an' begins tó git nervous.

"This is a fool stunt," he says to Maggie, cross as a bear, "an' nobody but you'd ever try it. I'm gettin' cold feet."

"Aw, shut up," says Maggie.

"I don't care," goes on Spig, "I'm goin' to drop out an' let this bird go on. I wish I'd croaked him up there in the room. I can't do it here with any prospect of a git-away. Suppose, jest suppose, that a dick should recognize you or me an' stop us. If this bird's out after you, others probably is too."

"I never thought of that," says Maggie. "Maybe we had better duck."

So they do, leavin' me all alone. They hop out while the driver's waitin' for the traffic to clear an' he don't see 'em at first, then he's afraid to yell. So he goes on over an' stops at the curb an' opens the door an' looks in.

"I'm afraid," he says. "That tough bird's liable to drill me if I take you out, an' I'm afraid I'll git pinched if I don't."

I can't help him none, only gurgle, but while he's standin' there thinkin' it over I git my feet loose an' I hump up on my knees an' my face an' start to back out. It's hard work with my hands strapped back of me thataway an' I take considerable skin off my face. If you don't believe me, try it once. But I back out anyway, only my nose keeps ketchin' an' gits scuffed up frightful. When the chauffeur sees me comin' out like that, he decides it's time to duck an' disappears complete.

After considerable trouble I'm able to git up on my feet. A few folks stop to see the show. There I am with a gag in my mouth, my hands strapped behind me an' a rope danglin' from one foot. Some more folks stop but don't none of 'em help me.

I hop up to a dub an' waggle my head in his face an' all he does is back off. The others laff but they don't make no move.

"Don't it beat thunder what some folks'll do for publicity," says one gink.

"What's he sellin'?" another guy asks.

An old woman comes breakin' through the crowd.

"Movin' pictures," she snorts. "Where's the camera?"

I give the gang as mean a look as I can but I can't do it right on account of one eye bein' closed, an' I try another young squirt who looks like he might have some sense.

"Nix, bo," says this gink. "I'm sorry for you an' all that, but I don't mix up in nothin' I don't know nothin' about. Call the police."

"He oughta be arrested," says a woman. "He looks like he's jest broke outa jail anyway."

The crowd of rubbernecks gits bigger an' blocks the street, an' there I am caperin' around, gagged an' hands tied up an' nobody'll help me out. I try to rub the gag outa my mouth on the taxi-door an' the gang roars.

"Loop your foot through it," suggests one fresh guy, an' then they all chime in with what they think is funny cracks.

While they're havin' all this fun up comes a bull, hustlin' to find out what's blockin' the sidewalk an' half the street, because by that time autos has begun to stop an' is tootin' horns. I never see a policeman quite so surprized."

"Here, what the ——'re you tryin' to pull off?" he yells.

The cop takes the gag outa my mouth an' I tell him who I am. Then he gits out his knife an' cuts my wrists loose an' I show him my shield.

"Quit your cussin'," orders the bull. "I don't care if you are a dick, there's ladies attendin' this free show of yours." I guess I was sayin' some pretty bad things, seein' as I was kinda mad. "I think you're stewed," says the bull, "an' I guess I better send you down to the station."

He thinks better of it in a minute when he sees I ain't, so I duck out, but it takes a squad of seven bulls from central to clean up the jam, an' all they git outa it is that some guy tried to give an exhibition like Houdini but couldn't git hisself loose. The sergeant later hears it's me an' puts down in his report I done it all myself.

I KNOW Maggie ain't goin' to hang around the old home no longer, but I have one hope that she'll maybe beat it back there to git some clothes or a powder-puff like most wimmin do before she really blows. Most of these crooks have rooms all around town an' I figure she'll try to make one of these an' lay low for a while.

I'm on the right track but jest a minute too late. As I turn the corner she's tearin' out in a big auto. She waves her hand at me, gay as you please, an' dashes on.

They ain't but one thing to do, an' that is commandeer an auto an' follow. Of course the first I ketch is a fliv, but I tell the guy I'm an officer an' to whoop it up. He's a pretty good guy an' he puts his knee on the horn an' we pick up Maggie's car. She's keepin' outa the traffic an' sails off up to a district where there's lots of hotels an' apartment houses. I'm wise to her game.

I'm keepin' up with her pretty well an' I have hopes of ketchin' her in another block or two, when a bread-wagon tries to turn in the middle of the block. It's a sin the way people violate the traffic-laws. We scatter bread all over the street an' the fliv's a wreck.

I'd 'a' lost Maggie there, but she runs into a torn-up street. She turns around, an' she don't stick out her hand neither to let anybody know it, an' comes tearin' back past us.

I pick about a dozen pieces of glass outa my face an' grab a section of ear that's cut clean off, not knowin' whether it's mine or the other bird's but it is mine, an' hop outa the wreck. The bird who owns the fliv yells his head off wantin' to know who's goin' to pay for his fliv an' him bein' hurt an' all, but I don't pay no attention. I have one eye on a motor-cycle standin' acrost the street an' if it ain't locked I see myself gittin' Maggie Dolan in spite of everything. It ain't. I hop on an' I pretty near ketch up with Maggie jest as she's slowin' down at a second-class hotel. She beats me in an' is goin' up the elevator when I hustle up to the clerk. I show him my shield.

"What room, buddy, did that lady go to?" I ask. "Quick."

"517," says the clerk.

I'm up to 517 in another minute an' of course it's locked, so I jest put my shoulder to the door an' walk in. Sure, it's empty. She ain't even been in the room. I go over to the winder. Maggie had gone down another elevator as I come up or drifted down the stairs an' maybe out a side entrance or the back or the front for all I know.

So I'm jest lookin' out the winder, jest lookin' around, wonderin' what to do next, when out pops Maggie on to the sidewalk down below. She takes a look all around an' she dopes it out maybe I'm waitin' to nab her if she starts for the auto, so she lays off that. She sidles over close to the buildin' an' starts sneakin' along inconspicuous as possible. I felt like jumpin' down after her, but it's too far. I'd 'a' taken a chanct on two stories.

The fire-escape runs down past the next winder, but I ain't got time to stall around an' hunt for the right way to it. I hop up on the winder sill. It don't look so very far to the railin' on the fire-escape platform, so I take a long breath, plant my feet firm an' jump.

It's further than I'd figured an' I miss the top rail, but I ketch some grill work that like to tore my hands to pieces. Anyhow, I hang on an' grit my teeth, because it's curtains if I fall. My feet is danglin' down an' no place to put 'em. I can't git up, an' Maggie Dolan's gittin' further away every minute. They ain't but one thing for me to do—that's yell for help. I can't hang on there very long. So I let out a yelp an' then another an' a few more. Then I find I can hook an elbow in that grill work, but I can't git up any better. However I ain't in so much danger of fallin' an' I'm able to look down an' see I've attracted some attention. Several people is lookin' up. In a minute they's a crowd, but they don't seem to understand I need help.

I yell—

"Help, help, help!" again an' a guy goes down an' pulls a fire-alarm box.

We've got a pretty good fire-department all right, an' while that guy should have come up through the hotel an' got me, still I'm thankful anyhow. In about a minute the street's full of fire-trucks, hook an' ladders, fire-engines, hose-carts, assistant fire-chiefs, insurance-inspectors, policemen, automobiles an' people.

The firemen run around in circles for a minute till some one points me out danglin' up there, then they put up a ladder to the lower end of the fire-escape, an' a couple comes gallopin' up.

"How'd you git out there?" asks one of the firemen while they're liftin' me over, "an' where's the fire?"

"I'm it," I tell him. "Fell out."

We climb down an' there's a —— of a lotta hubbub, an' right in the middle of it a bird sails up with a cop an' points me out.

"That's him," he says. "He pinched me motor-cycle right under my nose. I'd know him anywhere, the dirty crook, by his black eye an' his face all skinned up. He run right into the hotel while I was follerin'."

I was grabbin' for my coat to show my badge when they's a commotion in the crowd an' a feller pokes through.

"That's him," he says. "He wrecked my auto an' left me. I see him pinch the motor-cycle." It's the guy whose fliv I'd commandeered. There's another man with him.

"Yeah," he breaks in, this other guy, "an' he ran into my bread-wagon an' ruint a whole wagon-load of bread an' pies. Why, pies an' bread is scattered for a block."

I'm so surprized I can't hardly git my breath an' I'm ready to sail into the whole gang an' wipe up the street, when I sudden think of Maggie Dolan gittin' farther away, so I show the cop my badge an' tell him who I am.

We duck into the hotel an' I explain to the bull, but he ain't very well satisfied. Finally he goes to the phone an' calls up the captain of detectives an' the cap tells him I'm O.K. an' out on special assignment. So that pacifies the bull an' the motor-cycle man, an' I tell the other fellers to put in claims for the fliv an' the pies, which is all I can do, an' after a while they all clear out.

"Well, I've lost Maggie Dolan for good," thinks I, an' start outa the hotel, when I see her auto still standin' there through all the excitement.

Here's where I do some good, clever detective work. I know Maggie ain't comin' back for her bus, but somebody is. I walk up a block, grab a taxi an' shoot him down opposite Maggie's auto, where we stop.

"Follow it," I tell the taxi-guy, an' I slide down outa sight. We wait there a full half-hour an' nobody comes an' I'm gittin' leary I'm off wrong when the taxi-guy says—

"Hist, a guy's lookin' at the auto."

I take a peek an' there's a feller standin' by it, jest lookin'. Pretty soon he looks all around kinda cautious an' in he pops an' sails off, us after him. He goes back downtown about a mile, an' then he eases down an' stops.

"Pass him an' stop at the corner," I order the driver an' we do.

The bird who's drivin' Maggie's auto gits out an' disappears, leavin' the machine standin' there, so I cross the street an' lay in a doorway. I wait a long time an' my eye's hurtin' fierce, not to speak of my ribs an' my face an' my head. Then acrost the street I see Maggie turn the corner an' start easy-like towards the auto.

Of course I sift over back of her, an' jest as she reaches it I tap her on the shoulder. When I tap Maggie she don't jump none, she jest looks up in my face an' smiles.

"Oh, hello," she says, cheerful as you please. "Is that you? I thought you had a date up at the hotel?"

"Come along now," I say, "like a nice girlie. The chief wants to talk to you. I told you before it ain't a pinch, but it will be if you keep up this monkey-business."

Maggie seems to realize at last I've got her an' she goes along meek as a lamb.

"You think you're pretty smart," she says. "Trouble with me was I figured you're such a boob you'd wait maybe up in that room for me to show up. Shows you can't always tell by looks." Sarcastic little ——.

I figured so long's she peaceable I'll walk her down to the station, which ain't far away. I could have taken her auto, but I don't dast drive an' let her free to work some devilment, an' I don't dast let her drive because she'd jest as soon run plumb into a stone wall an' try to git away in the excitement.

So we walk along pleasant as you please till where the crowds is gittin' thick. I'm keepin' clost to her when what does she do but jab a hat-pin into me about a foot.

Of course I jumped three feet high an' let out a yelp that brung attention from everybody in the block, but I had sense enough to grab Maggie's arm. Seein' she can't make her gitaway she lets out a screech.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she cries. "Won't somebody help me? This brute's hurtin' me. Help! Help!"

Of course a big crowd collects right away. Maggie's sobbin' like her heart's broke an' lookin' awful little an' frail, an' there I am, a big husky guy, holdin' her arm tight an' me all mussed up an' lookin' pretty much like a bum.

Several men look threatenin' an' while I ain't afraid, I think I've had enough trouble for one day. So I'm peaceable an' I throw open my coat to show my shield, thinkin' I'll git some consideration when they see I'm a detective, but that —— had pinched my shield. I'm so surprized I drop loose of her arm an' she ducks.

"The big four-flusher, he's tryin' to make us think he's an officer," says a husky-lookin' guy. "Somebody's already been workin' on him an' I got a notion to finish the job."

"Go on," a coupla other ginks egg him on. "We'll help."

That makes me mad, so I hit the big guy a back-handed slap that rolls him over an' then the fight begins. I couldn't see only outa one eye, but I was gittin' along fine until some bird swipes me over the head on my blind side. I think it was a section of lamp-post or a water-plug or maybe it mighta been a board, but anyway the next thing I know is the riot squad under Sarge McGinnis pullin 'me outa the bottom of the pile.

"Hospital case," says the sarge, "git an ambulance. My gosh, but this bird's beat up scandalous."

"Hospital ——," I say. "Lemme outa this, I gotta find a lady."

"Brute Kenton, on my soul," says McGinnis, "but no one would ever know you. So you're at the bottom of this ruckus. The captain's lookin' for you to explain another riot that a traffic cop says you started by tyin' yourself up an' not bein' able to git loose."

"Lissen, Mac," I say, "I'm workin' for the big un, special, an' I can't go down an' make no explanations now. You lemme go an' don't say nothin' temporarily an' I'll square all this. Just say it's a riot."

"I'll say it was a riot," agrees Mac. "I'll put this bunch in the bull-pen till you git around to file charges," an' him an' his gang beat it with about a dozen or so prisoners that'd been fightin' me. "You'd better clean up a little," says Mac in partin'. "You look like you'd been in a auto wreck an' a explosion combined."

* * *

I KNOW right where I'm goin' an it ain't to clean up. This time I'm' goin' to git Maggie Dolan. I git a taxi because I'm lookin' too much like a bum to ride a car an' I beat it down near where Spignola an' his gang hangs out.

I'm pretty sure Spig is loafin' around laffin' at me with a bunch of his cronies. Him an' his gang uses a back room at Gonetelli's barber-shop an' bootleg joint to loaf in considerable, so I jest walk right in.

All this talk about Spig bein' a crackerjack gunman's all wrong. He ain't no gunman, otherwise he'd got me right there. He jest lets his mouth fly open, he's so surprized, so I hit him on the chin. Anytime you ketch a guy with his mouth open an' crack him, it's the hay for him. His two pals recover an' make a pass for their guns but they can't shoot, the room's too small, so they try to bean me with the gats. We tangle all over the room an' finally I git a table leg an' lay 'em both out. Then I grab Spignola an' jerk some sense back into him.

"Where's Maggie Dolan?" I yell in his ear. I know he can find her if he wants to, that she's probably beat it back an' he's hid her.

"Don't know," says Spig, so I choke him some an' press a thumb down on his Adam's apple. I give it a good, hard jab then I let up.

"Where's Maggie?" I ask again.

"You ain't got no right to do this," sputters Spig. "I ain't done nothin'."

I press again, then loosen up.

"Where's Maggie?" I ask.

Sprig's pretty near done for.

"I'll find her," he says when he gits his breath, the dirty welcher.

I keep my fist on his neck an' we march out the back way an' down an alley. When he stops at some stairs I put my gun right in his back-bone an' I says:

"Just one bone-head play an' you pass out. Go ahead."

"Don't shoot if she ain't here," Spig begs. "Maybe she ain't had time to git in, but she phoned me she'd put you on the fritz an' was comin' down here."

Spig's yellow O.K. He leads me up the stairs, then up a half-flight an' knocks three times on what looks like the wall. It opens up an' I stick my foot in it. There's Maggie, hid snug in a little secret room. She's terrible surprized to see me, but she recovers pretty quick. I clip a coupla bracelets on her, not takin' any more chances.

"This ain't no pinch," I tell her. "The chief jest wants to talk to you."

"Why, Brute dear, one would think you distrusted me," says Maggie. "Couldn't we jest walk along pleasant like to the station?"

I don't even answer her. She made me sick an' tired.

Anyhow I lock Spig up in the room an' I take her down an' call a taxi again. I don't take the handcuffs off till we're pullin' up to the station. Then we walk in an' I shoot her direct to the chief's office.

I have to wait a few minutes an' the chief's secretary eyes me curious. He knows who I am.

"Don't you wanta wash up, Sergeant Kenton?" he asks me. "You can leave the lady here."

"Nix," I say, "I don't leave this lady here."

Pretty soon we git in.

"Chief," I say, "here's Maggie Dolan you wanted to talk to."

The chief swings around in his chair an' looks at us, especially me.

"Detective Sergeant Kenton," says the chief, "you've been fightin' again. An officer should not engage in brawls. Your clothes are a disgrace an' you're bloody all over."

"Yes sir," I say, "but here's Maggie Dolan you wanted to talk to."

The chief draws up a memorandum paper on his desk an' looks it over, slow.

"Yes," he says, "I did want to talk to her, but I got the information I wanted while you're stallin' around tryin' to pick her up."

THE HEADSMAN'S SWORD

by John L. Considine

ONE of the most impressive chapters in fiction is Dumas' description of the terrible scene in which *Milady*, trapped at last after a life of crime, meets her fate at the hands of the headsman of Armentières.

The idea of an ax usually accompanies an execution by decapitation, but with the headsmen of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries, the ordinary weapon was a sword of extraordinary weight and dimensions.

A typical blade was six feet long with a huge handle to be grasped with the two hands, and with an iron ornamented knob as counterpoise at the end of the handle. Considering its size and weight, it was easily carried; for not only was there a cross-piece as handguard, but above this was a crescent worked in the iron, the horns extending with the convexity toward the point of the handle.

By putting a couple of fingers under these horns, the sword was carried at the side, pommel downwards, blade up, with perfect ease, the balance was so true. Such swords—usually bearing many notches—are to be found among the curio collections of continental Europe, especially those in ancient German towns.

Rifle Rule

A Five Part Story
Part II

by Hugh Pendexter

Author of "Old Misery," "The Long Knives," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form

IN 1856 when Kansas was torn between the pro- and anti-slavery men, Hale Watt, a young Southerner, slipped quietly ashore from the river-boat *Pole Star* and with his horse continued his journey by unfrequented roads.

Toward nightfall his horse went lame and in searching for a place to buy another, he stumbled on a house filled with men, whom Watt at once identified as Border Ruffians—thieves and murderers who terrorized the country in the name of Law and Order.

Pretending not to notice their interest in his satchel filled with gold, Watt prepared for bed in an upper room. During the night he narrowly escaped death, and fled with a fresh horse leaving a dead man behind him. From then on the Southerner realized that "Crow" Agger and his gang would be on his trail.

Next day he took the steamer again and there met "Prairie" Palmer and Enoch Fair, a young Northerner, who, sadly bewildered by the hostile crowd, was being harried by a "Regulator."

With some difficulty Fair was rescued and a friendship sprang up between the Northerner and Southerner. Fair wanted to take up farm-land and with some reluctance Watt agreed to join him. The young Southerner evidently feared something, but his new friend was unwilling to question him.

Prairie Palmer left them on good land and pushed on to the West. Already this part of Kansas was getting too crowded for him.

One day at the nearest store Fair was held up by some of Agger's men who insisted he was riding a stolen horse. The fiery old store-keeper, who did not want his trade ruined, put the men to rout, and Fair rode back to Watt who pointed out more trouble. In a rough square made of four timbers on the land they thought was theirs, was a notice:

"This is Bud Peoples' claim, he'll shoot anny man what comes in a mile of it."

"SOME one got ahead of us!" cried Fair.

"Bah! Some one—nothing. Palmer said that lots of men like this fellow, who signs himself Peoples, came across the border last year and left 'cautions' just so they could claim residence when they went to vote."

"Then it doesn't amount to anything?"

"Of course not. Four timbers in a square is his house. The shingles on the pole signifies he's shingled his building. That gave him a fine standing as a genuine settler when he went to vote. The country is speckled with this kind of pre-emption cautions."

"All right. I'll pre-empt here. Next time they'll find I have my ax."

"What do you mean? Any time when you needed it bad and didn't have it?"

As they walked back to the fire Fair briefly described his adventure at the store. "And the leader of the Regulators, the man who called himself Crow Agger, seemed to be a thorough scoundrel," he concluded by saying.

"Crow Agger!" exclaimed Watt. "Why, that's the man who tried to murder me in an old tavern outside of Westport. Lord! Why couldn't I have been in your shoes! Wouldn't Agger have been surprized!"

They talked the subject to shreds; then Fair asked:

"Do you really mean it? About going in for stock-raising?"

"Of course I mean it. What good will it do me to plug along to Fort Riley with my hams and canned goods?" sharply retorted Watt. "Now we'll cut logs and make you a cabin. Then we'll see what we'll see."

"Hale, I've been mighty lonesome in thinking of you going on and on——"

"And on and on," broke in Watt. "Now

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you're such a —— of a fellow with an ax let's see you show your caliber and lay a few trees on the ground so we can house the goods."

The breakfast was rather indifferently cooked, but the realization he was about to make a beginning in home-making sauced it exquisitely for Fair. Bolting the last of the charred bacon Fair announced:

"This first house will be only a temporary shelter. The sooner it's up the better. But I don't want to disturb this growth, so we'll get the logs farther up the creek."

"Not much Yankee thrift in that," grumbled Watt. "Wasting time in getting the logs up here. But go ahead. I'll haul them with the horses."

"While waiting for me to trim out some logs you might take the pick and shovel and start on a well," suggested Fair.

Watt stared at him in amazement for a moment; then demanded—

"Waste time in digging a well when you've got that creek at your front door?"

And he pointed to the beautiful, clear stream.

"There'd be some sense if I went fishing, for the creek is alive with fish. Dig a well!"

"And perhaps alive with cholera once the water lowers and forms a scum. Territory is peppered with it, they say, and it's usually among folks who drink stagnant creek water. A well is absolutely necessary, but I'll have time——"

"Oh, I'll dig the well," groaned Watt. "But I'd give a thousand dollars to have two or three hands here to do this infernal work."

"I wouldn't give twenty-two cents," was the short reply. "When this place is done it'll stand for free labor."

Watt darted him a moody glance; then laughed ironically. Fair's blue eyes flashed the danger-signal. Watt explained:

"I was thinking the well would probably be my monument. Just laughing at myself. Get to your tree-chopping and I'll begin on the well."

Until midday Fair swung his ax among the walnuts and amply demonstrated his shrewd skill. By the time Watt had laboriously excavated a five-foot hole there were several logs trimmed and ready to be hauled to the site of the cabin. The noon meal was cooked by Fair and they fared much better than at breakfast. The afternoon found Watt's enthusiasm waning, especially after Fair had told him the well must be lined with rocks. But each time the young Southerner paused to despise his task the ring of his friend's ax pricked his conscience and he returned to the unaccustomed labor. When night came and they ceased their labors to prepare the evening meal Watt disconsolately remarked:

"Water's seeping into the well, but I must have made some mistake. Water's as muddy as the Missouri."

"Of course," comforted Fair. "But bail it out and it'll come clear enough. We'll do it after we've eaten."

That night they slept the sleep of the profoundly tired and did not once hear the barking of the coyotes. The morning broke clear but as cold as late October in northern New England. Watt shivered before the fire and condemned the climate. Fair was puzzled, although he tried to make light of it by taking a plunge into the creek. Yesterday the temperature, had they possessed a thermometer, registered ninety. Watt declared the Summer was over and that the territory had eleven months of frosts and snow. They wore their blankets while eating breakfast. Then came a visit to the well, and, to their delight and Watt's great pride, they found it half-filled with clear water. Now that the well was a success Watt secured a camp ax and proceeded to trim the trees as fast as Fair felled them.

In this fashion did they work until they believed they had enough for the walls of the little cabin. Fair had planned the simpliest of shelters, consisting of a square of logs, piled one above the other, notched and saddled so as to fit into one another a foot short of the end of each. As the four sides rose Watt found time to secure rocks for the outside chimney and fireplace.

Late one afternoon after Fair had finished sawing a doorway and three small windows through the solid walls Watt called his attention to an ominous mass of clouds rapidly rising over the western horizon, and mounting vertically rather than creeping over the landscape as Fair was accustomed to behold the effect in the north. The light waned and the climbing wall furnished a new conception of the immensity of space.

"It's going to rain and blow," warned

Watt. "We should be stretching a canvas over the logs."

He had barely finished when the face of the wall was seamed with fire and there came the low rumbling, grumbling of thunder. The two hurriedly stretched poles across the roofless structure and spread the canvas. As they completed the temporary shelter and were carrying their supplies inside the landscape darkened as the storm swept down, riding on a tremendous gale. The darkness was that of night except when the lightning threw the rain-soaked land into relief. For some minutes the two friends could only stare in awe at the heavens as the electrical discharges bridged the horizons and created limitless oceans of flames. The thunder roared continuously. The mighty wind hooked its fingers under the canvas and tore it loose and sent it fluttering, a vague gray shape, across the creek. The surface of the stream showed a livid white as the force of the deluge beat it into foam.

Watt yelled in an attempt at humor—

"I'm going outside to keep dry!"

Fair rearranged the supplies under a worn buffalo-robe. Fortunately there was little to be damaged aside from the flour, salt and sugar. After several hours of terrific gales and rain there came a lull, and Watt stripped and plunged into the foaming creek. When he returned he had the canvas, which had been whipped around an oak. They got it back in place and weighted it down and were congratulating themselves the storm was about spent when the lightning began again, and there followed another downpour that lasted almost all night. Never had either of the two endured such a dismal period of waiting.

"I'll never go through anything like this again," bitterly assured Watt, as soaked and chilled, with his teeth chattering over every word, he crouched on the earth floor of the cabin. "Morning will find this whole country an endless lake."

"If the creek rises we may have to get out and swim for it," replied Fair.

An hour before sunrise the rain ceased and the wind dropped. Despite their sodden clothing the two leaned against each other and slept uneasily. And when they opened their eyes each admitted he had never gazed on a fairer sight. The vivid green grass rose wave on wave until it melted into the distant skyline, and the whole earth was bedecked with flowers of every shade; such flowers as the New England housewife nurses and watches over for the sake of a brief period of enjoyment. Birds sang, the creek was in its proper channel, and the dry earth had absorbed the downpour and gave thanks. Nor did a single cloud speckle the enormous stretch of the deep blue arch.

"This is a mighty queer country," remarked Watt as he finished his coffee and filled his pipe. "Air seems a little cleaner than any I ever breathed. It ought to, after the washing it got."

"I never expected to enjoy anything better than this," declared Fair, his optimism at its peak again. "With a snug house we wouldn't have noticed that storm."

"Then let's drop everything else and get at the roof," urged Watt. "The wind blew strong enough to lift fish out the water."

A few minutes later he was excitedly crying:

"Hi, Enoch! This well is about full."

When the ridge-pole and the cottonwood roof-poles were in place there remained the problem of a weather-tight covering. Neither cared to spend the time and energy necessary to obtain the broad flat pieces of wood called "shakes," which were often used for roofing. They could get these in Topeka, but in addition to the cost the transportation of them would be something of a problem. To split them out would take much time. Fair finally decided that canvas could be made to answer if it were properly held in place. He offered to make a beginning with what material they had if Watt would take two horses and ride to Topeka and secure more. He insisted he could put on the canvas unaided, there being enough to cover one side of the roof. Glad to be in action Watt readily assented, and, leading a pack-horse, set off for Topeka.

FAIR lapped the canvas over the ridge-pole and secured it. At the end of the roof he made the side fast by nailing a pole over it. With the cloth spread smoothly he brought saplings and nailed them over it at regular intervals. He now had half a roof consisting of the stout fabric placed between two layers of poles. The lower edge of the canvas he made fast with another pole. Much pleased with his work he proceeded to bring mud of a clayey consistency from the bank of the creek and commenced building the chimney. He had placed and plastered the rocks collected by Watt to a height of several feet when he was startled by a voice calling out—

"What you doing here?"

Wheeling about he beheld a shaggy-headed fellow, mounted, and carrying a double-barrel shotgun across his saddle.

"Light and have a bite to eat," invited Fair.

"Naw. What I'm asking is, what you doing here?"

"I'm building a chimney. Are you one of my neighbors?"

"Neighbor? By —— that's good! Let me tell you, you ain't neighbor to no one on this crick. I own this claim and them 'provements. What'n —— you mean by squatting on a honest man's property?"

Fair's mind worked rapidly, his heart swelling with rage. His voice, however, was calm as he said—

"If this is your claim I certainly haven't any business here."

"You'd better believe it's my claim!" shouted the man, now satisfied he was to encounter no resistance.

"If it wasn't your claim you'd scarcely come here and say it was," sighed Fair. "What's your name, Mister?"

"Never mind my name. Git out! Mizzle!"

"But I do mind your name. I've built a cabin and dug a well. You tell me to clear out. I want to know who's taking over these improvements if I've made a mistake in pre-empting here."

"You'd better believe you've made a mistake! What's to come of our law'n order if the minute a honest man's back's turned some young snippet hops in and jumps a claim?"

"I'm not a claim-jumper," assured Fair. "I only asked for your name."

"This does all my talking."

And the man patted the shotgun.

"It'll be easy for you to kill me. But I'm not alone in putting up this cabin. My friends will be back soon. It'll do you no good to kill me. I'm saying that if you have any title to this quarter-section you don't have to do any killing. To begin with, what's your name?"

"My name happens to be Pelks," growled the claim-jumper. Then defiantly, "Any fault to find with that name?"

"No, sir!" cried Fair. "It's a good name. It has a smack and a ring to it. A man with that name wouldn't claim anything that wasn't his. But before clearing out I'd like to have you ride into the timber a bit with me. Only a few steps back of the cabin."

Pelks glared at him suspiciously and growled:

"I mind just one thing. I wanter see your back mizzling out of here. That's all."

Fair's eyes grew cloudy.

"See here, Pelks," he gently explained, "if you kill me that ends it for you. Now I'm going to walk back of the cabin. There's something there you'd be curious to see. It's in a bottle. If you won't come, don't. If you're scared, stay here. You have a gun and I am unarmed."

With that Fair turned and started to walk into the grove.

Pelks fingered the gun and glared savagely for a few seconds, then cried:

"Scared? I'll l'arn you how your whining, sneaking breed can scare Jem Pelks."

And he sent his horse along after Fair to see he did not secure a gun. Without glancing behind him Fair led the way to where the "caution" in the whisky-bottle had been left inside the four logs. Pelks watched him closely as he picked up the bottle, then breathed in great relief and growled:

"Why couldn't you a said it was licker? We usually shoot claim-jumpers on sight in this country, but I ain't the most bloodthirsty cuss in the world. Pass over the bottle and clear out."

Fair uncorked the bottle and drew forth the paper and handed it to the horseman, and requested—

"Just read that. I found it here when I came to locate."

Pelks stared at him angrily, and after a glance at the scrawl replied:

"It ain't writ reg'lar enough. What's it got to do with you squatting on my claim?"

"I'll read it to you," said Fair, moving a few steps to one side to get within reach of a certain tree. "It says: 'This is Bud Peoples' claim. He'll shoot anny man what comes in a mile of it.' "

"Well, what if it does say that?" blustered Pelks, his eyes narrowing.

"Nothing much unless you happen to have two names," said Fair, tossing the bottle behind the logs and at the same time stepping closer to the tree.

"I don't give a cuss what you think! You just mizzle. You hear me?" roared the ruffian, striving to work himself up to the proper pitch.

"All right. Have it your way," said Fair.

And his hand caught up the ax he had left leaning against the tree, and before Pelks could shift the position of his gun he beheld the keen edge raised to within a foot of his head. The fellow was nonplussed by the appearance of the ax.

"Drop that gun, you skunk!" muttered Fair, the ax quivering as his accumulated rage came near to unseating his reason. "Drop it!"

Pelks estimated the chances, and, being a coward at heart, decided he had lost the advantage. His eyes betrayed the sudden terror seizing upon his soul and he allowed the shotgun to slip through his fingers and fall on the ground.

"Now you turn about and see how fast you can ride," Fair ordered.

Pelks was prompt to obey, but once clear of the timber he shouted back over his shoulder—

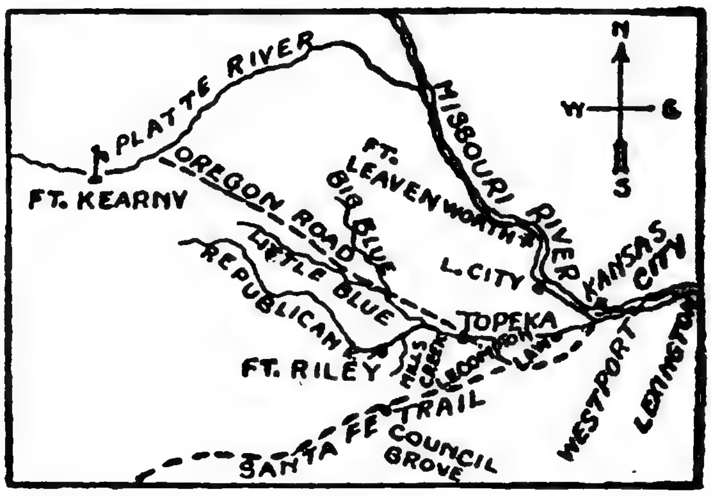
"I ain't so much alone as you're thinking."

"Faster!" yelled Fair, lifting the gun to his shoulder.

And Pelks rode his best. Fair took note that the fellow did not stick to the creek path but swung off as if making for the Fort Riley road. Crow Agger had turned off south of the Riley road. Fair believed the gang had a rendezvous within a few miles west or southwest of his cabin.

The young immigrant was nervously elated. He was well-pleased with himself in this, his first success, in meeting threatened violence with violence. Despite their rough speech and attire and many weapons he was beginning to suspect the evil element in the territory were not the fire-eaters he had believed them to be. The fellow would probably return, Fair told himself. He was bothered because of the shotgun. He had deprived a man of his property; and even though the man be a dissolute character Fair's respect for property rights impelled the wish the intruder had taken his weapon with him.

However, on the whole, he believed he had acquitted himself worthily. Watt would warmly approve of his action, possibly lament he had not split the fellow's head. For the rest of the day, wherever he moved, he carried the shotgun with him. By night he had thoroughly dried the blankets and the buffalo-robe. The last was a parting gift from Prairie Palmer, left surreptitiously by the plainsman so as to avoid any thanks.



Fair was lonely that evening. For the first time he fully realized the value of Watt's companionship. He could think of but little he and the southern man had in common, and yet he liked him immensely. One was a builder and a saver. The other leaned to dissipation and was inclined to be a waster. As he cooked and ate his supper he wondered why the Southerner cared to remain with him.

"He's a man that a fellow can depend upon in trouble," mused Fair. "Yet our ways are entirely different. He'd never quit a friend in a pinch. Still I must be dull company."

He looked ahead eagerly for Watt's return, and yet when his friend came back on the following evening, somewhat boisterous from drink, and with a half-emptied jug strapped to the roll of canvas, he was angry. With scant tolerance he spoke his mind. Watt smiled bitterly as he listened to Fair's scorching arraignment. His smile vanished and his dark eyes glittered ominously when Fair finished and wrathfully hurled the jug into the creek. Black eyes glared into blazing blue; then Watt conquered some mad impulse and began to laugh. Fair's rage melted, fearing the fellow was half-mad. And, after all, in throwing away the jug he had taken liberties with another man's property. Watt was still laughing when he stumbled inside the incomplete shelter and threw himself on his blankets.

When Fair turned in Watt assured him:

"You won't be bothered by me any longer, Old Deacon Face. You're too —— finicky for me. Think you're better than I am, eh? One of those holier than thou fellows! Don't you worry about my sins. Tomorrow morning will see me well down the Fort Riley road. Threw away my jug! —— you! No one else could 'a' done that and have it end with the jug in the crick. I let it pass as we two won't have any truck together after sunrise."

Morning found him sick and miserable and with Fair gently waiting on him.

"That jug still in the crick, Enoch?" he faintly asked, after Fair had brought him another dipper of water.

"I got it out last night—after you were asleep. It was your jug. I had no business to heave it in. You're all knocked to pieces. I suppose you need a drink. I'll go and bring it."

"Wait a minute!" groaned Hale, pressed both hands to aching temples. "No. I started to play your game, Enoch. I'll finish it if it kills me. A drink in the bottle is a mighty good friend after the night before. But I'm playing Old Sober Face's game. If you don't mind leaving me a pan of water I won't bother you any more."

"I'm making you some strong coffee. But if a drink——"

"——! Stop it. Fetch me some coffee when it's ready. Throw the jug back. And say, Enoch; I made some travel talk last night, didn't I?"

"Down the Fort Riley road, was what you said, Hale."

"I'm the biggest liar in Kansas, Enoch. If you'll call it quits I'm here to stick so long as you stick. It's so cursed slow and lonely I overstepped."

"Not always so slow," corrected Fair; and sitting beside him he told what had happened during his absence. The pale face took on color.

"Jumping catfish! To think of excitement here and I not around to enjoy it! Luck always favors you, Enoch. There was the row at the store, and now the claim-jumper!"

"That's the trouble. I'm afraid Pelks will come back with a gang. He said he would."

"Glory be! Hope he does. No; I won't stay here. I'll crawl out and look after our defenses."

And after Fair's protest he got on his feet and rummaged the cabin until he had collected his weapons.

That day enough grass was cut to make two beds once it had dried. By night the roof of the cabin was finished. With the buffalo-robe hung over the doorway and with a blaze crackling in the unfinished fireplace both the settlers found conditions vastly improved. On the next day Watt, more esthetic than his companion, brought in a huge bouquet of small blue flowers with lily-like leaves, the graceful spiderwort. Fair knew he had spent time and energy in gathering these from an outcropping ledge up the creek, but he was careful to say nothing to offend the high strung nature. Watt diffidently remarked:

"There's some straw-colored flowers. Look like evening primrose variety. Might be a good idea to dig some up and transplant them around the cabin."

"They'd make the place look more homey," gravely agreed Fair.

THAT night there was much shrill, quick barking of coyotes, and when they went forth in the morning they found all their horses strayed. The picket-ropes had been cleanly cut as if by a knife. They voted the harmless coyotes a nuisance.

The cured grass was moved into the cabin and arranged for beds. Then followed the many small tasks which meant the completion of their home. The chimney was carried up to a proper height and fuel was accumulated for the fireplace. In pleasant weather they cooked their meals outside over a camp-fire. In wet weather they used the fireplace. There came an influx of small life that first amused them, then sorely tried their nerves. Fair was the first to hear a buzzing sound inside the cabin one night. He sleepily described it to Watt as being the loudest noise a grasshopper ever made. Watt, more sophisticated in this particular, sharply ordered him to remain motionless. Rising in the darkness he lighted a candle and armed himself with a long stick of firewood.

"It's a rattlesnake," he explained to Fair.

The next moment he was striking with the club and ended by holding up the intruder, some eighteen inches in length and possessing four rattles. In the morning Fair found a tree-toad resting close to his head. Watt in disgust announced the discovery of a mouse in the water-pail. And before they could dress a swallow blundered in through a window and made much flapping of tiny wings before it was shooed outdoors.

"Too much —— nature in this cabin life," grumbled Watt.

"We'd better turn our boot-tops into one another so the snakes can't crawl into them during the night," suggested Fair.

Half a minute later Watt was shooting with his pocket revolver. Fair shuddered as he stared at the yellow-spotted writhing reptile under the edge of the robe that covered the doorway. One bullet had destroyed this intruder, the others having perforated the robe.

That morning Fair suggested they look up their neighbors. Watt was pleased to do this.

"My idea is to ride up the creek for several miles and get the lay of the land and learn who's squatting in this neighborhood. We know the country down-stream to the Kansas," added Fair.

"Sometime when you feel like a real ride we could go to Fort Riley. Fellows in Topeka say they have a fine band there," Watt wistfully remarked.

"When we have more time. Of course you can go any time, Hale."

"Fine way to get rid of me. No."

They picketed their spare horse and taking shotguns rode up the creek, keeping on the edge of the grove that bordered the bank. The first habitation they sighted was a tiny one, made of logs with a cottonwood roof. Back of it and partly protected from the weather was a large mowing-machine. The machine appeared to be almost as large as the cabin. As they cantered over a natural lawn a man appeared in the doorway, a long rifle in his hand. Throwing up the weapon he commanded:

"Stand off a bit. You're strangers to me."

The horsemen halted. Fair handed his gun to Watt and with hands held empty before him rode forward.

"We're your next-door neighbors down the creek," he explained. "Just built our cabin. I'm from New England. My partner is from the South."

"You seem to be all right, young man; but your partnership is mighty queer. Still you look honest," slowly said the settler. "There's so much —— diggery being raised around her I have to be careful."

With his suspicions finally disarmed the man insisted Fair summon his friend and that the two enter and visit. Through the doorway Fair could see a bed filled much of the interior. The heads of three little girls bobbed into view behind the man.

"My name's Emery," informed the settler, putting his rifle aside. He was now as anxious to have some one to talk to as he had been suspicious. "My woman's Iowy. Hi, Liz!"

"Just a minute," answered a woman's voice.

When she appeared she was barefooted and wearing a chameleon silk. She urged the young men to enter, but Fair decided the cabin already was rather crowded and made excuses. As they rode away the Emery family formed in a group outside the cabin and the parents shouted invitations after them so long as they were within hearing.

The next settler proved to be a Pennsylvania lawyer and his wife. The man was broken in health but much improved since coming to the territory. They were "old settlers," having come out the year before. Their name was Dagget, and the woman, in her modestly checkered gingham and white linen collar and cuffs, was very attractive to both young men. She insisted they enter and they were glad to do so. She gave them milk to drink. Milk was a luxury, and both politely refused until assured the couple had several cows and would not be depriving themselves. The interior of the large cabin was very pleasing. There were bright window curtains and a white cover on the table, and the linen of the bed was snowy. There were shelves filled with books, and a melodeon in one corner. The visitors exchanged glances, each thinking of the new cabin and its entire lack of refinement. With a grin Watt told Mrs. Dagget:

"Don't see how you do it, madam. Our place looks terrible."

She was amused and told her husband:

"Some day when you feel equal to the

ride we must go over there. Perhaps I can make some suggestions."

"There's oceans of room for suggestions," assured Fair, finishing his milk. Then anxiously, "Regulators bother you any?"

The Daggets exchanged startled glances and the man slowly replied:

"No; we are not bothered. Places are too far apart out here for them to make a profit."

"You must be careful in your talk," warned Mrs. Dagget, her pale face flushing. "A careless word repeated might cause you trouble."

When they were ready to go Fair stepped outside with the lawyer while Watt lingered to talk with Mrs. Dagget. Fair took the opportunity hurriedly to warn the man to be on his guard. Dagget displayed much uneasiness and muttered:

"I've been left alone so far. I don't believe I'll be troubled. But if they get after you the best thing you two can do is to pull out. If you should repeat what I've said my cabin would be burned and my stock run off. Perhaps worse."

As they rode on Fair remarked:

"Daggets seemed to be afraid to talk. Seemed to know lots more'n they'd tell."

"They do know more than they'll let on they know," agreed Watt. "While I was inside with her she advised us to seek another location. I didn't try to pin her down to anything definite as I could see she was scared by the few words she allowed herself to say."

One more call the young men made, and it was at the most curious habitation they had yet seen. It consisted of two cabins, some ten feet apart with one roof covering both. In the covered space between the two was a stove, the pipe extending through the roof. One of the houses was built snugly against an outcropping ledge. By standing on the roof of this cabin one might reach up and pluck the blue flowers of the spiderwort that grew in the crannies of the upright rocks. The buildings also were some distance from the creek and had no trees. The location was much more exposed than the average settler would approve of.

Watt and Fair rode slowly up the grassy slope and halted when a woman, armed with a rifle, appeared in the doorway. Watt whispered from the corner of his mouth:

"Indian blood in her. Quarter if not a half-breed. Looks like a Cherokee. Bet she's from Indian Territory. See her gay moccasins."

Then he was calling out to her and explaining:

"Only two new settlers from down the creek, madam. We're using the day getting acquainted with our neighbors."

"The old man isn't at home," she replied, speaking slowly and in a husky voice. "Are you Regulators?"

"Lord forbid!" laughed Watt. "Just settlers. Could we have a drink of water?"

She hesitated a moment, then stood the rifle against the wall and with a flash of white teeth invited:

"Come in. Something better than water. The old man has a jug of snake-medicine. Always has the jug well-filled."

"We'd rather have water," hastily replied Watt. "I've had too much snake-medicine already."

This frank confession brought another smile, and she lost much of her restraint.

"You're from the South," she told Watt as they entered the cabin.

She pointed to a pail of water and a dipper and remarked—

"The old man won't be back for a day or so."

Two things were plain to Fair. The woman did not relish his presence but she had taken a liking to Watt. Fair considered this to be perfectly natural, for his friend could be most charming when the mood was on him. And now, for some reason, he was in high spirits.

"We noticed the odd way you have your house located," observed Fair.

The woman flashed a peculiar glance at him and muttered:

"The old man likes it. It shelters us from the west winds."

"Best location we've seen," warmly approved Watt.

Then he rambled on, asking questions but not waiting for her to answer them; and during the twenty minutes his tongue was busy both had ample opportunity to observe several incongruities in the woman and the room. She wore moccasins, and an expensive satin dress. In Lawrence, there were many New England women who had brought the best of their wardrobes, and satins and velvets were not uncommon. For those women had come to help build a city, which would be copied after far eastern communities. But this satin dress did not harmonize with the moccasins, nor the slovenly arranged hair.

In the coarse braids, too, were several elaborate combs, betraying her love for the barbaric. And there were bracelets and rings on her wrists and fingers. Nor were these pieces of jewelry and geegaw trade trinkets. Their money value would have advanced Fair well on the way in his stock-raising enterprise. The chairs were home-made, and poorly constructed at that; but opposite the large stone fireplace was a long lounge of eastern manufacture, covered with brocatelle, the same being soiled by muddy boots.

Rich damask curtains were at the windows, but put up with nails, and soiled and rumpled as if the "old man" had used them for towels. A fancy clock stood on a rough shelf, flanked by dainty flower-vases. The vases were entirely dissimilar in pattern and never had been sold as a pair. What thrilled Fair was a copy of "Mrs. Lincoln's Botany," much used in the schools back East. A second glance at the familiar volume filled him with disgust: many of the leaves had been torn out to be used as "spills" for lighting candle or pipe.

"If you don't want any snake-medicine, or more water you'd better be going," abruptly advised the woman, interrupting one of Watt's florid bits of nonsense.

Fair's face burned at the dismissal, but Watt was in no wise disconcerted. With a gallantry that made the woman smile broadly he expressed his reluctance to leave such a cultured environment, and backed from the house under cover of a humorous description of their own humble shelter. The woman followed them to their horses and informed them:

"You're fools to try stock-raising. Times are bad. More fools for trying it when you don't know anything about it."

"Madam, I believe you are right," Watt heartily agreed. "But it seemed to be the only thing we could do."

"This man—" and she nodded coldly toward Fair—"should go back where he came from. This is not the place for him. You are not like him. You dare to do things. You like good times. You like easy living. You can go into trade."

"But I know nothing about trade," ruefully confessed Watt.

"You'd do fine in trade. Different kinds of trade. Sometime, soon, you ride out here alone. The old man show you a good trade to make."

"Thanks. Maybe I will. But I didn't catch your husband's name."

"He doesn't like company," she said, ignoring his hint. "Your friend mustn't come again if the old man doesn't call and ask him. But you can come in three days. He'll be here. He can show you a fine trade to make. Good-by."

She darted back into the house and closed the door.

"Queer woman, queer place," muttered Fair as they turned down the creek. "Seemed to take a strong liking to you."

"Thinks I'm a reckless cuss," growled Watt.

"So much jewelry. And that dress. And the only book used for lighters."

"There's a hole in the cliff. That's why the cabin backs up against it," snapped Watt, his rollicking humor vanishing. "I kept talking nonsense long enough to learn that."

"How in damation did you find it out?" gasped Fair.

"Used my eyes while gabbing. Maybe it's used as a cellar, only they don't seem to be raising any vegetables to put in a cellar. Then again, they've tried to cover up the place where the logs are sawed through and fitted to hinges. Why try to hide an honest door to an honest cellar?"

"May use it as a hiding-place if the Regulators pay them a call."

"Possibly, but I'll wager that woman can stand off a whole regiment of Regulators. Did you notice the guns in the cabin? Three rifles; two of them Sharps. And I counted six revolvers and four bowie-knives. And there was one sawed-off shotgun."

"Your eyes were sharper than mine. I did notice two or three guns."

"Then there's the second cabin. When I was mounting and palavering with her in the yard I glanced through the window. No gay coverings or curtains in there. Just a half dozen box-bunks."

"What are you driving at, Hale?"

"That it's a mighty good place to be riding away from. That Indian woman and her 'old man' may not care for company, but they have accommodations for half a dozen or more men without using their own cabin."

"Well, we're clear of them. If they don't want to be neighborly——"

"That's the point. Why don't they want to be neighborly? Enoch, I'll never feel satisfied until we have a look at the hole inside that ledge and learn who the old man is."

CHAPTER IV

WHEN A CABIN'S A CASTLE

EACH day taught its lesson. After another severe storm Fair insisted there must be an improvement made in the culinary department. After considerable discussion it was decided they must buy a stove. Fair borrowed a cart from Emery, their nearest neighbor, and Watt set out for Topeka. Fair began to miss him and his cheerful ways almost before he had passed from sight. He tried to busy himself with repairing the fireplace, but the bunches of rattlesnake-weed flowers collected by Watt the day before accentuated the loneliness of the place, and Fair went outdoors. As an excuse for action he saddled a horse and rode up to the Emery cabin to learn the best method of stacking hay.

"Put it on long ricks, ten feet wide and from twelve to fifteen feet high," Emery told him. "Be sure and cut it as soon as it's in bloom, for if you don't its food values will change over into a woody mess that's no good for stock."

"We can't do much this year as we haven't any hay-cutting machine. Never thought to tell Watt to buy two scythes."

"When the grass is ripe to cut it'll be higher'n my head, even when I'm sitting on my machine. You'll find it slow work mowing it with a scythe," Emery discouraged him. "And the grass along the creek is coarser'n the grass on the uplands. Tell you what I'll do—you two fellers pitch in and help me a certain number of days and I'll let you take the machine for the same amount of time."

Fair was delighted to accept this offer. Leaving Emery he rode on to the Dagget place and received a cordial welcome. His errand was to inquire about the occupants of the double cabin, but the moment he mentioned it Dagget and his wife looked very sober. By the time he finished telling of his visit to the place the couple were exchanging uneasy glances.

"I'm afraid I shouldn't have told this," he said as he noted their embarrassment.

"That part of it is all right," Dagget slowly replied. "But don't go there again. The woman has been here and we always treat her kindly. She seems to enjoy visiting us. Probably she gets very lonesome. She told us not to worry; that no harm would come to us. Nor have we been bothered any. I can't say much more. It might go hard with us if you should repeat anything I've said. But it's no place for you and your friend to visit."

"I'm much obliged. Of course we noticed things and were curious."

"Don't let your curiosity get you into trouble. I know you don't want us to be annoyed, and I'll say this much: The people at the double cabin do not farm, yet they live well. Other neighbors often have to borrow supplies; the woman in the double cabin has tried to give us supplies. Settlers have a hard time in breaking up this strongly rooted prairie land and making it ready for crops. The double cabin hasn't turned a sod and yet seems to thrive, The woman has taken a fancy to my wife. The man never comes here."

"What's his name?" asked Fair.

Dagget's thin face flushed and he glanced helplessly at his wife. She shook her head.

"I mustn't say another word," said Dagget.

"You shouldn't. I shouldn't have asked any questions. I'm mighty glad things are as they are for you. Watt and I talked it over and were a bit afraid on your account."

"That was very nice of you," said Mrs. Dagget. "Now we shall be worried on your account. You say the woman seemed to like you?"

"Liked Watt; not me. Every one likes Watt. But we haven't anything worth stealing."

"Except your land and cabin," muttered Dagget.

"We'll hang on to both."

"Don't take that attitude. By your own tell the woman isn't hostile to you two young men. She asked you in. She gave you good advice. Whatever you do, don't make any resistance," Dagget earnestly pleaded. "Say they should ask for the *loan* of a horse; smile, and point out your best."

"I'll point a shotgun," was the stubborn reply.

He rose to take his departure, realizing the couple were in a very uncomfortable frame of mind, and he regretted being the cause of it. They did not urge him to remain, and as he walked to the door he observed Dagget casting an uneasy glance out of the west window as if fearing to behold horsemen riding down on the cabin. Mrs. Dagget followed him outdoors and insisted that he take a jar of butter and a bag of biscuits. After she had induced him to accept these she whispered:

"I wish you and your friend were in Topeka. Why not go back there and let the stock-raising go until another year? There's plenty of work in Topeka, and you would do well. My husband is almost an invalid. He's growing stronger out here, but—well——"

"I understand perfectly, Mrs. Dagget," broke in Fair. "I'm mighty glad you have escaped any trouble. As to going to town, it was powerful hard work building that cabin. Guess we'll stick it out."

"Perhaps everything will be pleasant." But she said it with a sigh. "We're in a bad position, with my husband so feeble——"

He nodded understandingly and rode down the creek. So strongly was he impressed by the woman's manner, her desire to talk and tell him things, and her great fear of speaking unguardedly that he turned from the creek and made for the Emery place. Emery would talk. He had a rifle and would not hesitate to use it. Dagget was an invalid and helpless; Emery was able to play a man's part. He would soon learn the truth about the double cabin.

He was cordially welcomed by the Emerys and urged to remain for supper. He accepted the invitation and waited until Mrs. Emery was busy with her cooking and the children were at play before bringing up the subject to the man. After telling of the visit to the double cabin he added:

"The woman looked to be part Indian to Watt and me. She never gave any name; just spoke of the man as 'the old man.' Who are they, anyway?"

Emery's lean, brown face drew down grimly and he stared thoughtfully at the western horizon for a minute before speaking; then he said—

"Ever hear of Cap'n Hemp?"

Fair shook his head.

"It don't matter," Emery muttered, still watching the skyline. "Just forgit I called that name till you hear it from somebody else."

"He doesn't farm. He doesn't raise any stock," mused Fair.

"He seems to flourish. Woman's from Injun Territory. Might as well call her his wife. She's sort of lonesome when she's left up there alone."

" 'Cap'n Hemp' sounds rather suggestive," Fair remarked.

"We wa'n't to mention any names any more," reminded Emery.

"All right to ask if you have been troubled any?"

"Ain't got nothing to steal, less it's the mowing-machine. I was mighty nervous last Fall when they put up the two cabins. Then they went away and I thought they weren't coming back. But early this Spring they showed up. But, Lor' sakes! It ain't for me to be talking about neighbors who treat me well. Why, the breed-woman give my woman that pert looking silk she' so proud of. If I was you and that t'other young man I'd try desperate hard to be friendly with the double cabin."

"There's no doubting his being a —— rascal," growled Fair, his gorge rising at the thought of having to cater to the pleasant side of some border scoundrel.

"Thinking things won't ever cost you a cent if you don't go to blabbing out loud the things you think," hoarsely whispered Emery, with a shifting glance along the western crest of the rolling prairie. "The breed-woman seems to be took with our little Elsie. Gives her stuff to make dresses out of. Gives my woman a fine gown. But I don't know nothing about 'em. I can say that no one along this crick has lost hoss or beef-critter yet."

"They probably making their bag some distance from here and just use the double cabin as a hiding-place," muttered Fair. "What does he use the hole, or cave, in the rock for?"

"Hole in the rocks?" harshly repeated Emery. "See here, neighbor; you're going too far. I don't know nothing about any hole, or cave, and I don't intend to. Let a sleeping dog lay where he is."

"Not another word from me," agreed Fair, disgusted at finding the same fear hovering over the Emerys that he had observed shadowing the Daggets. "Things have happened to me that make me think I'm to have trouble with the double cabin.

I only wanted to know something about them."

"I don't know anything about 'em. I don't want to," declared Emery. "And if you was in my shoes and had a woman and three children to think about you wouldn't be so free to talk. If you're down for any trouble you'll be fetching trouble on other folks first thing you know."

"God forbid!" earnestly exclaimed Fair.

Emery turned back to the cabin, saying:

"The food oughter be ready by this time. Let's eat."

It was plain to Fair that Emery was frightened and wished to be rid of him. Fair walked to the cabin and observed Emery speaking hurriedly aside to his wife. Mrs. Emery redoubled her efforts and soon dished up the supper. From being garrulous the woman suddenly became preoccupied and gloomy. When Fair announced he must depart at once neither of the couple endeavored to detain him, which under ordinary conditions would have been most unusual. And like the Daggets husband and wife, while talking nervously, kept glancing from the rear window toward the rising waves of grass in the west.

With much to ponder over Fair rode slowly back to the cabin. There was a shadow over the land. What he had accepted as a disagreeable incident concerning only himself was proving to be a condition that affected his neighbors. He resented the fact most bitterly, and anger, a slow growth in him, began to tinge his thoughts. The sun was sinking in a wallow of blood as he entered the grove and picketed his horse. He found a new quality in his lonesomeness. He was not afraid, and yet there was the uneasy stirring of a vague apprehension. As he moodily walked to the cabin he had the feeling that some one was watching him with sinister gaze. He endeavored to shake it off as the dusk swooped down on the grove, but it persisted and abided with him even though he catered to it none by scouting the grove, or glancing over his shoulder, as he was often tempted to do.

He knew he was alone on the creek and yet he sensed evil spying as he cooked and ate his supper. He resolutely combated the notion by refusing to carry a weapon when he went to the creek for water. Suddenly he straightened and stared into the darkness of the wood and muttered:

"No one is here. I know it. But there's some one in the double cabin; some one thinking mischief for me. Wish Watt was here. Wish I had a good dog—even a cat. Something alive."

When it came time to retire he found himself very loath to stay in the cabin. Without striving to oust the nameless obsession he picked up his blankets and the buffalo-robe, secured a gun and the ax, and retreated some distance from the cabin and made his bed under a walnut. He was ashamed when he surrendered to the influence; and he was doubly ashamed when the sunlight awakened him. He knew it would be late in the day before Watt could return and yet he hurried in rolling his blankets, and he ran to the cabin, as if afraid his friend might arrive at any minute and discover his weakness.

He believed that the time would come when he would confess it all to Watt, possibly after they had passed through a common peril. With a gasp of dismay he dropped his blankets and stared at the piece of paper pinned to the side of the cabin by a rusty bowie-knife. Some one had been there while he slept. Approaching gingerly, much as if the knife were a poisonous snake he scanned the rude scrawl and slowly spelled out:

> You 2 have 48 hrs. to be quit of this crick. Go at once and make sure. Cap. Hemp.

"I was right. Some one at the double cabin was thinking of me," he told himself in vindication of his panic the night before.

Then he realized that he must tell Watt of his withdrawal from the cabin, and felt his face burn with shame. He could not lie and say the notice had been pinned to the log while he slept; it had required force to drive the blade into the timber. To keep silent about the message was out of the question. It advertised a danger to Watt as well as to himself. He must tell so Watt would not be caught off his guard and perhaps assassinated while riding up and down the creek. If any doubt remained in his mind it was eliminated when he entered the cabin and discovered that the night-prowler had appropriated Watt's fine saddle.

"He'll have a nice opinion of me," mumbled Hale as he braced himself to make his confession. "I can see him sneaking off to the woods and letting some thief steal *my* belongings."

For the remainder of the day his abasement was quite complete. He had no heart for work and he was ashamed to find that, despite the warm sunshine, the shadow of fear still hung over the grove. Wherever he went he carried his ax and shotgun and was loath to attempt any task if it necessitated the laying aside of arms. It was late in the evening when he heard the creaking of cart-wheels and the voice of his friend lustily singing. For a moment he feared Watt had succumbed to his weakness again; then he was guilty of almost hoping this to be a fact, one weakness counterbalancing the other. Infuriated at the baseness of the suggestion he ran to meet Watt.

He called out a greeting.

"Hi! that you, Enoch? Got a dandy stove and at a bargain. They thought I was a regular Yankee the way I haggled and beat them down. You'd been proud of me," boisterously cried Watt as he leaped from the cart and found Fair's hand and shook it warmly. "And I'm glad to be back with you, Old Deacon Face."

"After you've heard what I've got to say I guess you won't think we need a stove," morosely replied Fair.

"Well —— my boots! And they're good ones, too. What's the matter with you?" demanded Watt. "Here I am, a returned prodigal, with nary a snort of liquor to feel meeching for; and first shot out the gun you fall afoul of me. In just what way have I *now* fallen from grace?"

"I've been falling afoul of myself, ever since early morning—ever since last night," groaned Fair. "Hale, you're going to feel mighty ashamed of me inside of five minutes."

"If you've been hitting that jug you got out of the creek—" Watt joyously began.

"Nothing so clean as that, Hale. I'm a coward."

Watt was speechless for a few moments, then began to laugh.

"Enoch, I'm afraid you're drunk. I never quite reach the self-condemnation stage myself. Always makes me think well of myself. You were lonesome and took a mild drag at the jug——"

"You can't laugh it away. I'm a low-down coward."

"All right, son. Never mind the rest till we get this stove inside and the horses taken care of, then I'll nurse you back to sobriety. As William of Avon puts it——"

"Don't. I feel horribly cheap. Just a coward; that's all."

"And that's enough," cheerfully assured Watt. "Now let's see if you're too scared of a stove to give me a hand with this —— contraption. It has clattered and rattled and banged in my ears until I'm near crazy."

They got the stove and pipe inside the cabin and Fair attended to picketing the horses. When he rejoined his friend he found Watt had the pipe in place, only he had run it out one of the windows. He was examining his work with much admiration, and gleefully explained, "As simple as it is logical. Wind shifts; Hale Watt shifts pipe to t'other window. Wind dodges back; back goes pipe."

"Never mind the pipe. Let's talk. Rather, let me talk."

Watt filled his pipe and gravely waited for the confession. Fair hurriedly explained his sense of fear and his retreat to the woods to spend the night. As he paused Watt threw back his head and uncorked his mirth.

"New England conscience. Nothing like it, Enoch. Bet it used to make your Connecticut Yankees gnash their teeth every time they sold us poor —— shoe-pegs for oats."

"You may not feel like making a joke of it when I've finished. Read that."

And he handed over the warning.

Watt's amusement vanished as he deciphered the scarcely legible writing. His brows contracted as he examined the bowie-knife. And he said:

"Thank God for your New England caution, Enoch. If you'd slept in here last night this knife would have been between your ribs. You sleep very sound, you know."

"My 'caution' was cowardice."

"In telling me that you've done a braver thing than Hale Watt ever will do. I've been scared but I never would confess it. Let's forget all about it."

"And while I was away from the cabin your new saddle was stolen," added Fair.

"Whoever stole it got a good one," growled Watt. "Who is this Captain Hemp?"

Already feeling relieved by confessing what he considered to have been a great weakness, Fair described his talk with the Emerys and the Daggets.

"The fear of the man is on them, also," he said. "I believe they're so scared of him they won't make us feel very welcome the next time we call."

"Then we won't call," Watt promptly retorted. "And I'm mighty glad there's a promise of excitement in this lonely spot. So it's Mister Cap'n Hemp, who lives in the double cabin! Now I know I'm going to stick to stock-raising and be contented here."

"Lucky you took your shotgun with you, or they'd stolen that."

"That reminds me! Wait a minute."

And Watt darted from the cabin and to the cart. When he returned he was carrying two new Sharps rifles and a Colt thirty-eight.

"I got just one of these hand-guns as you said you didn't feel at home with them. Just heft that and get the balance."

Fair took the weapon and handled it awkwardly. It seemed to him to be very heavy for a side-arm, for it weighed two pounds and ten ounces unloaded. But he was deft and quick in manipulating the rifle; and Watt commented—

"You're as much used to that sort of a gun as I am."

"North-woods hunting. Now what are we to do about this warning?"

"Wait for them to make good their bluff by paying us a call," Watt grimly replied.

"That, at the least. But they've stolen your property. I was wondering if it wasn't our duty to ride up to that cabin and demand to know what they mean by such actions."

Watt stared at him in amazement and gasped:

"Ride up in range of one or a dozen men hiding behind thick log walls, Enoch? You've been calling yourself a coward, but I'm not brave enough to make a target of myself. I'm just low down enough to wait where *we* have the advantage of log walls."

"We'll talk after you've eaten. I'll dish up your supper. I've kept some warm."

And Fair brought in a skillet of beans, cooked in the ground the day before, New England fashion, and a plate of crisp bacon. After Watt had satisfied his appetite Fair inquired for Topeka news.

"Two men found dead, murdered, within half a mile of the town yesterday morning. Both close to the road. Several cabins between Topeka and Tecumseh burned and the folks turned out of doors with only blankets to cover them. Stock run off. Lots of horses being run over into Missouri. River-road down to Lawrence is dangerous to travel; armed men holding up wagons and folks afoot and robbing them. Prowlers are everywhere. Every one talking, every one very much excited; more guns being worn in Topeka than ever before. That's about all. No; I was forgetting the bogus greenbacks that some one had passed off on the merchants. Man who sold me the stove gave me one in change for some gold-pieces. I turned it back to him and he was much surprized. Think he is a northern neighbor of yours; and none of your old neighbors would knowingly do anything like that. At the hotel they came near suspecting me of passing the stuff, but the proprietor remembered that Prairie Palmer had vouched for the two of us."

They talked later than usual that night and when they came to turn in it was Watt who suggested they stand watch. Nothing disturbed them, yet the morning found both apprehensive. Cabins were being raided throughout the territory, and so bold had the wandering bands become that it was no longer thought necessary to wait for night to disguise them.

The two friends put in the morning pacing off Fair's quarter-section, doing the work by guess; and while one walked out a line and drove a stake the other kept watchful guard with a rifle. Because of this wasteful necessity almost every where the development of the new territory was being retarded. Labor was withdrawn from the fields to stand on the defense. Growing crops were being neglected so that the husbandman might prevent the banditti from burning his cabin.

IN THE afternoon the two, fully armed and carrying axes, proceeded up the creek, and, beginning at Fair's south line, walked off a quarter-section for Watt to pre-empt. By the time they had finished the measurements and had cut four logs on the site of the cabin the sudden dusk was sweeping over the prairies. Now that he was about to become a squatter and have a cabin of his own Watt became very enthusiastic. Fair wondered if the fellow's slaves did not have better quarters on the Mississippi plantation. Watt was like a child with a new toy. During the walk back to the cabin he laid out several thousand dollars in talk in improving the two places. He was very eager in using at once some of his gold in buying agricultural implements for the two claims. Fair would not listen to this proposal, even after the impulsive fellow insisted on buying a mowing-machine and other implements to be used in common by the two of them.

"You can do as you will with your own," Fair told him. "But there's no sense in buying what we can't use this season. It's too late to do any farming. The best we can do this season is to put up your cabin, hold the two claims, cut the grass and make an early start next Spring in putting in crops. Then, as we get ahead, paying our way, step by step, we can work into stock-raising. The hay will find a ready market at the Government posts as well as in the towns. Although ours is coarse we'll get within two dollars a ton of what they pay for the upland grass. Emery says that."

Watt grumbled and muttered something about "too cautious Deacon Face," and hunted up a pick-ax and shovel he had left to mark the spot where he intended to dig his well. He attacked the ground to mark the spot, but unlike the soil where he had so painfully dug the first well he found the excavating very difficult even after he had removed the sod.

"Too dark to bother with that now," impatiently said Fair.

"Too hard work to do it any time," growled Watt as he abandoned the task in disgust. "Wish I had some of my boys here to do it."

On arriving at the cabin and lighting the candles he stared at the spade and exclaimed:

"No wonder it was hard digging. I was trying to make a well in a bed of clay."

"There wasn't any clay where we drove the stakes on the west line."

"Take a look at that. It's clay."

And Watt passed over the spade. There was no mistaking the clayey smears.

Fair consoled him:

"It doesn't matter. You can dig the well somewhere else. It's only a bed. More than ninety-nine per cent. of this quarter-section is good farm land. Yours must be the same. We'll work them jointly, I hope; full partners in everything."

"Doesn't matter?" jeered Watt. "Where's your Yankee smartness?"

Then he aroused his friend's admiration by continuing:

"There's a bed of clay. Clay means bricks. We have plenty of wood to fire a kiln. Bricks are fetching twelve to fifteen dollars a thousand in Topeka, and the price will go up inside of six months because of the increased demand. You're a good business talker and Topeka men are mostly of your kind. You go there and make a deal for the builders to take the bricks at the mouth of the creek. That'll leave most of the haul for the contractors, but they have the teams and a good road. We'll get a big wagon and make our horses earn their keep."

Fair was infatuated by the suggestion. He could picture the partnership turning an excellent profit before the first of the year. There would be no waiting for next year's crops, nor dependence on the hay crop. His enthusiasm equaled that of Watt's; and now he had received the idea he applied his orderly mind to planning the kilns and preparing a large stock of fuel. He was somewhat familiar with the working of a brick-yard and his native ingenuity permitted him to overcome obstacles which would have bothered his more impulsive friend.

By the time supper was cooked and eaten each was on the road to affluence, and Watt was trying to decide how he could buy the most amusement for his money. Fair, with no financial background and taught by hard living to safeguard his profits, was all for putting their joint earnings back into the land. He insisted that with a new central plains road—Palmer had said it would surely be opened—and with a railroad on its way to cross the territory, there would be a radical rise in land values.

"Look at Leavenworth," he argued. "It's built on reserve land and no man has a title to the land he's squatting on. The railroad hasn't touched it yet. And still inside of two years the price of land there has jumped from one and two dollars an acre to fifty and a hundred dollars. Now at a dollar'n a quarter we can pick up lands——"

His eloquence was cut short by the bark of a gun and the whine of a bullet through the open window on the west side of the cabin. Reacting automatically to the threat Watt puffed out the candle and grabbed for a rifle.

"For the time I was forgetting Captain Hemp," he growled. "Don't show your head at the windows."

He crawled to the door and, remaining prostrate, thrust his head under the buffalo-robe and endeavored to reconnoiter the banks of the creek. The darkness baffled him.

"I can see something back here," whispered Fair, his heart pounding loudly under the stimulus of danger.

Watt joined him under the west window.

"Through the crack between the logs where my hand rests," murmured Fair.

Watt found the crevice and stared through a narrow and natural opening of the grove. He beheld what had caught Fair's sharp gaze. Several dark figures vaguely outlined against the sky along the crest of the western slope.

"Their horses," he told Fair. "If they'd fired from that elevation their bullets would have plunged downward. The bullet that came through the window hit well above the eaves. It was traveling upward. That shows they sneaked down the slope through the tall grass and are among the trees. They've come after us afoot."

He lowered his head to peer through the crevice again and ducked back convulsively as there came a red flash and the explosion of a second gun. The bullet smashed harmlessly into a log close by the window.

"They're shooting by guess," said Watt.

"Let's get outside so's not to be cooped up in here," Fair nervously urged.

"It's best to be cooped up. If we can stand them off till daylight we can make them take cover."

From the grove back of the cabin, and sounding ominously near, a husky voice called out:

"You two in the cabin there! Light your candle. Drop your guns. March out with each one of you carrying a lighted candle in his hand."

"Go to ——!" called back Watt.

"Do as I say and do it at once, or we'll cut your throats."

"If we come out what will happen to us?"

"You can go free. You'll know enough not to come back to this creek again."

"Who's doing the talking out there?"

"Cap'n Hemp. Kansas don't want none of your breed. Look smart. My men are gitting anxious to close in with cold steel."

While he was talking Watt managed to work the muzzle of his new rifle through the crevice, and as Hemp ceased speaking he fired at the sound of the voice.

Imprecations and horrible threats answered the defiant shot. It was a method of intimidation that was characteristic not only of Kansas but of all new frontiers, where bluster and braggadocio seek to overawe those who love law and order. And Fair for the time being was intimidated. With Watt, more used to the broad claims of border bullies, it was different. He chuckled softly. He would not be more courageous in the ultimate test than Fair, for the New England man, having accepted the threats at face value, would be worked up to a high pitch of desperation.

A volley of bullets plumped into the logs and through the small windows. Thus far the defenders' only danger was the chance of being hit by a bullet happening to pass through a chink. Watt crept back to the door and softly warned:

"Don't fire at me when I come in. I'm crawling to the corner to take a shot at the flash of their guns."

"You mustn't!" protested Fair.

"No danger. None of them between us and the creek. Talk to them. Get them to answer."

Before Fair could renew his objections Watt had slipped under the robe and was creeping along the side of the cabin to the shelter of the chimney.

Fair called out and demanded to know what guarantee they would have if they surrendered.

"I've told you once," answered the thick voice of the leader. "But the two of you be sure you carry lighted candles when you come out."

Watt's rifle cracked at the end of the cabin and sent the leader into a frenzy of blasphemy. Several guns flashed in the grove, firing at the young Southerner's position. The bullets spat against the rocks of the chimney and knocked out the dry mud and Watt did not attempt to return the volley. But Fair thrust the navy revolver through the chink and emptied it at random. He was astonished to hear a howl of pain.

Watt, safe behind the chimney, called out—

"Hi, Bodge!"

"Yes," bawled back the ruffian.

"I thought so!" triumphantly cried Watt. "So Captain Hemp and Crow Agger are the same man. Good evening, Crow."

With a lurid stream of oaths the leader emptied two hand-guns into the chimney. When he had exhausted his magazines he hoarsely demanded—

"Who are you to call me Agger?"

Regretting he had betrayed any knowledge of the bandit chief's dual rule Watt retreated to the entrance and crawled under the robe.

"You know that man?" Fair whispered.

"Yes. Thought the voice was familiar. I was a fool to let on we ever had met. Same man who tried to take the horse from you at the little store. Give me that Colt you emptied."

Outside the grove was quiet. The croaking of frogs and the barking of the coyotes returned in the ancient chorus. Watt worked rapidly, but only his great familiarity with the weapon permitted him to reload it in the dark.

The besiegers began firing again, the shots now sounding nearer. One of the horses picketed some distance up the creek whinnied.

"They're after the horses!" cried Fair, the assault on property jumping his anger ahead of prudence. "We must go out!"

"Keep back!" warned Watt. "I'm going to try a game."

He swept his hand over the earthern floor and found the extinguished candle. From under his blankets he pulled handfuls of dried grass. He worked in silence for a minute or two, and then whispered:

"We'll attack them. Wished we'd sneaked out as you advised before they closed in. I've made a fire-ball of tallow and hay and weighted it with several bullets. Light it and throw it through the west window. Throw it hard and try to land it in the narrow opening. Then grab your guns and join me. I'll be at the north end of the cabin."

He crawled under the robe, armed with two revolvers, a shotgun and the Sharps rifle. The horses voiced their alarm, but Watt knew only one or two men would be spared for securing them, and contented himself with gaining the end of the cabin. Behind the logs Fair was lighting the fireball. For a moment the dull glow of the ignited grass showed through the chinks. Possibly the besiegers believed the cabin was on fire; for they witheld their bullets. Then the burning ball of tallow-smeared hay shot through the window and into the natural opening that cut the grove from east to west.

The maneuver took the attacking party by surprize and for a brief space left them dumfounded. As the dried grass flared up it revealed the startled, bewhiskered profile of Agger, alias Hemp, thrust from behind a tree. Watt fired with the heavy Colt and the bullet sloughed off an eyebrow as cleanly as the surgeon's scalpel could have removed it. With a terrific howl of pain and fear Agger threw himself to the ground. Then Watt was turning both guns loose, shooting wherever he snatched a glimpse of leg or arm. Fair was at his side, adding the contents of his rifle and concluding with both barrels of the shotgun. The lively fusilade was prolonged by Watt's Sharps and single-barrel shotgun.

Men were calling out in dismay to their mates to fall back. Screaming fearfully two wounded men started to run up the slope to where their horses awaited them. Then came Agger's voice from a distance, giving the command to fall back, but this order was superfluous, for the band already was in a panic. Watt howled and hooted in derision and frantically stuffed more cartridges into the Sharps.

Fair darted back into the cabin and returned with his ax. Watt ceased his triumphant hullabaloo to catch Fair by the arm in an attempt to drag him to cover. But the New England man's rage was now out of control. Like a ponderous engine, slow to start, it was under full headway and would run itself out. Yelling like an Indian he dashed into the grove armed only with the ax. Watt raced after him and called on him to halt. From the crest of the western slope came flashes of red, the outlaws now firing from their horses. Fair would have charged up through the tall grass had not Watt dragged him behind a walnut and held him until some degree of reason returned.

"—— 'em! I've stood about all I'm going to from 'em!" panted Fair, suddenly going weak.

"Don't get yourself killed," soothed Watt, opening fire on the skyline.

The enemy now were in full retreat and Watt was the first to start on a run up the slope. Gaining the top he located the horsemen by sound and sent a string of lead in their direction.

"They've mizzled, Enoch. Fled a stricken field! We've won the fight. They're curs when they find a fight facing them. We must look after our horses."

The suggestion their property might be in danger sobered Fair and he regained control of himself and hurried back to the creek. The picket ropes of the three horses had been cut, but the thief, alarmed by the clamor resulting from the fire-ball, had stolen only one. Watt's animal and one of Fair's were soon rounded up. Fair was for bringing the animals close to the cabin, but Watt objected, saying:

"They'll be shot if those fellows return. If they don't come back they're as safe up here as down at the cabin. You were wise in sleeping away from the cabin last night. We'll stay down here tonight."

Fair's mood now was deadly and inexorable. He controlled it, but he would drive it against all odds.

"They've been here twice," he muttered. "They've stolen your saddle and one of my horses. They're the same crowd that would have murdered me at the store. I'm sick of them. We know where they hang out. We must go after them and put an end to this business."

"Of course we'll go after them," promptly agreed Watt. "But I think more of my neck than I do of my property. We'll go after them, but we'll be Injuns in doing it. Tomorrow we'll hide our provisions, take the horses and ride down the creek as if making for Topeka. Then we'll swing southwest and scout that double-cabin after dark. They won't look for any danger coming from the west and we'll get on top of that high ledge and learn a few things."

"They may come while we're gone and burn the cabin," said Fair.

"Logs are green. Pretty hard work to burn them. But if they do we'll burn their cabin, or jump it and call it our own. It's a good claim even without the timber. All they can steal from this cabin is the stove, and they won't bother with that."

Although both believed there would be no further assaults that night yet they took turns in sleeping. Early next morning they buried in the ground, or secured high in trees, all their provisions and were ready to ride north. Each was armed with a shotgun and rifle while Watt wore two revolvers in his belt. Fair glanced at his armament, then ran behind the cabin and unearthed his ax.

"I feel more at home with this than anything else," he explained.

After they had proceeded half a mile they decided that both the shotguns and rifles were too cumbersome, and they hid the former under the thick foliage of an oak and marked the tree. If any of the enemy spied upon them as they resumed their journey he would assume the two had been frightened into leaving the creek and were returning to town.

CHAPTER V

REPRISALS

BEFORE dismounting at the little store on the California road, Watt and Fair sat with their rifles across their saddles and endeavored to see who was inside the small building; for there were two men at least. The old man came to the door and elaborately wiped his spectacles and after replacing them on the tip of his nose he peered over the steel rims, and greeted—

"So they ain't got you yet."

"Who's inside there?" sharply demanded Watt.

"High - cockalorum. Young bantam," growled the storekeeper, walking to the edge of the road. "Can't answer a civil question. Must know my business first."

"They tried last night to get us," spoke up Fair. "We've learned it pays to be cautious."

"No one gits any one in front of my store. It spoils trade. Tell young bantam that," snapped the storekeeper. And with an angry glance at Watt he muttered, "—— young southern hothead!"

"Hothead and Southerner yourself," shot back Watt. "Who's that man inside there?"

With a grim smile and a lifting of the white brows the storekeeper informed him: "Best of my belief that's one of Hemp's gang. Been here since early morning and doing a rare trade with my barrel of Bourbon. Seems to be killing time. Be you two coming off the crick?"

"We're coming off," mumbled Watt, slipping to the ground without removing his gaze from the rough-looking individual seated at the counter inside the store.

The craggy brows came down in a scowl and the storekeeper blocked the young man's way, and prowled:

"None of that. I keep the peace here. If you was Sam Jones, the sheriff, and that fellow was Jim Lane you two couldn't have any fuss within fifty yards of this place."

And a hand went to the bosom of the woolen shirt and pulled into view the butt of a heavy revolver.

"I'm not bringing any fight here, but I don't propose to be shot down in my tracks by any of those skunks hiding in a store," said Watt, yet halting his advance.

"There's only one man and he knows I'll kill him if he cuts up any caper. So you two young fellows are partners, eh? Queer combination, less you're both sound on the hemp."

"I am. My friend isn't," Watt frankly replied. "I wouldn't dare say as much if he hadn't told me how you stood by him when they jumped him a few days ago."

"Just business on my part," was the brusk reply. "I ain't got any liking for northern men as a rule. Lots of southern men I don't take to, either. I'm in trade. Your friend come to trade. No man on earth can turn trade away from my door."

"I should think that Hemp—or Crow Agger, as we call him—would be coming back here to even things up," said Fair.

The storekeeper spat in disgust and fairly roared:

"No man on earth will find me running away if he comes to 'even things up.' All I ask is time to clean my specs. Besides, Hemp can't afford to try any funny business with me. He knows I don't care where he hangs out, or how he gits his money. In the bad season, when few supplies are passing down the road, my store is handy for him. It ain't always safe for him to ride into Topeka. So he comes here and trades like an honest man and never kicks at my prices. We have a understanding without putting it in words. I won't do anything to hurt his business; he mustn't do anything to hurt my trade. So you two are coming off the crick." And he eyed them in mild surprize.

"We're already off," reminded Fair.

"I s'pose it's best," grumbled the storekeeper. "But when a man says he'll be killed before he'll turn his back, or give up a hoss, I git the notion he's a sticker. And at that—by your own words—you must have stood 'em off last night, or you wouldn't be here."

"There's small profit being cooped up in a cabin. If we can't cut our hay and be free to move around and improve our land we might as well be earning day wages in Topeka."

The old man smiled grimly and cast a sharp glance at the slim hands and commented:

"Working for day wages would be something new for you, young bantam. I know your breed. From down there myself. Come in and have a drink of the best Bourbon on the Kansas River."

"My last visit with the bottle nearly cost me a good friend," frankly confessed Watt.

Then with another glance through the window he added—

"That man inside is waiting here to make sure if we quit the crick."

"Prob'ly," agreed the storekeeper. "And now he's seen you moving for Topeka my whisky-trade will fall off for a spell. But you won't find Topeka any bed of lilies. Cabins burned and looted nearly all the way to Westport. Rare doings even in Leavenworth. Dead men found along the road as regular as sunshine. If I was young and hot-headed," and he paused to sigh, "I'm thinking I'd go to Topeka for excitement. But if I was cautious and careful I'd stick to Mill Crick and know I had only one gang to fight. If you ain't here for trade I'll say 'good day.' Feller inside may lose track of the drinks he's took while I'm gabbing out here."

And with a jerky nod of his white head he turned abruptly and walked to the door.

Watt swung on to his horse and the two rode headed for Topeka. But after rounding the first bend Watt again dismounted and stole along the dusty sumac bushes until he could watch the store. He was in time to see the solitary customer emerge and run behind the small building. When he reappeared he was mounted. Entering the road he turned southwest and kicked his horse into a gallop, taking the same course Crow Agger had followed when foiled in his attack on Fair.

Watt ran back to Fair and announced:

"Just as we thought. Spy goes to report to Agger that we've had enough and are legging it for town. Within a mile or so he'll leave the road and ride south. We'll give him plenty of time, then turn and jog up the road for a few miles until we're well west of the high ledge. No hurry, as we can't begin on real work till it's dark."

They walked their horses to the bend and waited until the swift-riding horseman was a dot, and until the dot had vanished. Then they returned to the store much to the old man's surprize.

"Tired of Topeka so quick?" he queried, darting keen glances at one, then the other.

"We've come to trade. We want something to eat," tersely answered Watt.

"High-cockalorum!" mumbled the storekeeper as he bustled about behind the short counter and set forth ham, beef, cheese and bread. "I'm here to take your trade." And he made no further attempt at conversation.

After they had eaten and paid the shot he followed them as far as the door and repeatedly nodded his head as he watched them ride in the direction taken by Agger's spy. He watched them until they faded out in the distance and then told himself aloud:

"Young and hot-headed! What an old fool to think they was quitting! They're trailing that fool, who's hurrying to tell his boss how they're running away."

FROM a greasy billow the investigators stared toward the east and endeavored to locate the position of the double cabin. The sun, sliced in two by the red skyline, cast their shadows far before them. The immense stretches of grass-lands, marked off by timber-groves like a checker board, rolled up to their position and then swept on in endless undulations in quest of the Rockies. But of the double cabin there was not even a thread of smoke to indicate its position.

"I know we are nearly in line with it," insisted Watt. "The ledge hides it from view; only from this side the ledge doesn't show. We can begin going ahead as it will be dark very soon."

The night came swiftly, with no twilight hour to preface it. Coyotes began their barking chorus. With only the stars to guide them the two rode slowly down the gentle slope, the grass reaching above their stirrups. When they had advanced about a mile Fair called a halt and warned—

"We'll be riding right on to the roof if your notions of distance are correct."

"Listen!" whispered Watt. The quick, shrill barking of the coyotes was being answered by a deep baying.

"Dogs! Agger's dogs! Fierce looking ——. I hadn't counted on them. If they're loose and find us in this grass——"

He left the rest for Fair's imagination. They waited some minutes, but as the voice of the dog-packs sounded no nearer they decided the animals were not at large, and continued their advance. Finally Watt declared he could smell smoke. Fair dismounted, preferring to be afoot if attacked by the savage beasts; and for a weapon he was depending on the ax rather than on the rifle. The reek of a woodfire close by soon became unmistakable. Watt slipped to the ground and advised leaving their horses in a little hollow, and added—

"If we're near the ledge the sound of hoofs would carry far."

Picketing the two animals they breasted a gradual slope and found much outcropping rock under their feet. Almost before they knew it they were looking down on the narrow plateau at the foot of the ledge. Beneath them was the dark bulk of the double cabin, with a light showing in the window of the one built against the ledge. Both dropped to the ground to avoid being seen against the skyline. The second cabin was dark. The dogs suddenly ceased their fierce baying, but not before they had advertised their presence in the woman's cabin. For several minutes the two lay along the edge of the ledge and listened, but there was no sound of men talking.

At last Watt whispered:

"Don't believe any one except the Injun woman is at home. Don't know just what we can do. We can't hold her up."

"We must get your saddle and my horse back," insisted Fair. "But there doesn't seem to be any shelter for horses."

"They let them graze until they're ready to run them over the Missouri line. Agger and his men must be away——"

"Sh-h-h!" warned Fair.

And they snuggled closer to the ground as the door of the woman's cabin opened and let out a shaft of light. The person was almost directly below them and startled them by whistling shrilly. From out of the darkness there came the sounds of nimble hoofs, then the low whinny of a horse as the animal dashed up to the cabin. There followed a few low words in a guttural tone which neither of the young men could understand, but which Watt declared to be an Indian dialect. The light was extinguished and the door closed, and the watchers could see nothing. But they knew when the saddle was thrown on the horse, and they heard it creak as the rider mounted. A sharp command and the horse was galloping down the slope toward the creek.

"Breed-woman gone visiting," murmured Watt. "No one at home, and we have our chance."

"The dogs are at home," reminded Fair, yet following his friend's example and beginning to work down the face of the ledge.

His warning was accentuated by an outburst of fierce snarling and growling somewhere beneath them and sounding strangely muffled. They easily gained the roof of the cabin and remained motionless for a minute, much puzzled because they could not hear the ferocious animals moving about. Watt was the first to lose his patience. He crawled to the eaves of the low roof and gave his rifle to Fair to hold while he dropped lightly to the ground. Fair handed down the rifles and ax and joined him. The dogs now became silent except for an occasional growl.

"They should be leaping against the door, jumping up to the window, and racing around the room," whispered Fair. But no such tokens of hostility were given.

Watt drew a revolver and directed Fair to try the door. The door was not secured and gave readily. As it swung back Watt covered the dark opening. Threatening growls from the dogs greeted them, yet no animal bounded forward to dispute their trespass. Pausing to make sure the woman was not returning they stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind them. On the hearth glowed a huge red eye and Watt secured a brand from this and swung it into flame and located and lighted a candle. Fair caught up the lounge covering and secured it over a window. Watt masked the other with a blanket and then held the candle above his head. The first thing that Fair noticed was that "Mrs. Lincoln's Botany" was much thinner, more of the familiar leaves having been torn out for spills. Watt gave a little cry of satisfaction and picked up from a corner a saddle.

"My saddle, and they didn't even bother to hide it," he cried.

Fair focused his gaze on the blind door leading into the cave, or hole, in the ledge and remarked—

"Somehow that looks different."

"There was a big chair in front of it when we were here before. Now it shows more plainly," mused Watt.

"And the clothesline makes it look different," added Fair, nodding toward the stout cord stretched from a corner of the fireplace to the wall just beyond the door. From the cord was suspended a pair of silk stockings and a lace-trimmed handkerchief.

"No time to consider the family washing," said Watt, lifting his rifle.

"Don't touch that!" yelled Fair.

But even while he was crying out the barrel swung down on the line, and instantly the cave door swung back against the side of the fireplace and the dark opening was filled with fierce heads containing eyes of greenish fire.

The tableau lasted for two or three seconds and was ended by the dogs, five of them, leaping forward to attack the intruders. They came closely bunched, silent and deadly. Watt fired twice with his revolver, each bullet being fatal, and Fair split the head of the leader with the first swing of the heavy ax. Then one huge brute struck Watt on the chest and sent him on his back. The other sprang upon Fair but was dashed aside with a short-armed blow from the ax. Reaching down Fair caught the other dog by a hind leg and tore it loose from Watt. Then in turn he was again put to maintain his own defense by the weight of the brute he had repulsed.

The heavy bulk of the creature crashed against his right shoulder before he could straighten up. He went down on his face with the dog striving to get at his throat, and all he could do was throw his arms around the back of his neck. He felt the cruel teeth bite through to the bone and was conscious of a dull report.

With an effort he partly turned on his side and tried to get the brute's head under his arm while he groped with his free hand for some weapon. The dog yanked his head loose and drove his jaws for the throat, but Fair mechanically had covered this vulnerable point with his left arm. His mind failed to find any significance in a second dull explosion and he continued kicking wildly and felt his foot hit something solid. At the same moment the brute rolled off his chest.

Struggling to a sitting posture he beheld a bloody scene. The dog he had pulled clear of Watt was stretched out in death. Watt was half-way through the dark opening of the cave, lying on his back and visible only from his feet to his waist.

Securing his ax and staggering to his feet Fair nearly severed the head of the dog that had all but had him by the throat, and then made his way to his friend and dragged him out into the candle light. Groaning and sobbing in fear of what he should find he tore open the shirt and scarcely could credit his eyes when he beheld nothing more alarming than some dull red marks on the chest, made by the paws of the dog when he reared and launched his full weight against the Southerner.

"—— of a man—to help!" faintly gasped Watt, rolling his head and coughing.

"Where are you hurt, Hale? Tell me," begged Fair.

"Stomach," was the groaning reply. "Kicked me in—stomach."

"But a dog can't kick——"

"You kicked—Yankee idiot!"

And with a groan he rolled on his side and pumped for breath. Then he drew himself to a sitting position and bent half-over, both hands pressed against his abdomen, and faintly gasped—

"Fine way to serve a rescuer."

"Oh, Lord! I thought I was kicking the dog! Why, you must have killed him, Hale."

"Couldn't well help it— Muzzle jammed into his hide. It's even up. You dragged that other —— loose, just as he was getting me. Pistol arm pinned down— Finished him. Finished yours. Then got kicked."

Fair helped him to his feet and examined him for wounds. He found nothing beyond bruises and scratches. He bathed these with some of the "snake-medicine" and then took time to peel off his own garments. Several serious punctures showed on his upper right arm. On beholding these Watt gave a cry of dismay and forgot his own hurts. He bathed them with whisky and bandaged them with some of the breed's soft handkerchiefs."

"There, Enoch! I reckon you'll be all right. But what a mess for the housewife to clean up!"

"Load your revolver. Some one may come any time," directed Fair as he hurriedly resumed his clothing.

Finished with dressing he picked up the candle and made for the dark doorway. Watt followed at his heels, recharging the last chamber as he advanced. Instead of a small hole they found themselves in a room thirty feet square. The marks of pick-ax and spade showed that Agger and his men had greatly enlarged the original cavity. There were several rough couches along the walls and as many large jugs presumably containing strong spirits. A miscellany of staple supplies, looted from stores and wagon-trains, were heaped in one corner. But what held the attention of the young men was a small press in the center of the room. Above this was a circular frame holding a dozen candles and surmounted by a big tin reflector.

"Queer place for newspaper work!" mumbled Watt.

Fair pulled a box from under the table and threw a thick package of greenbacks on the press.

"Jumping catfish!" yelped Watt. "They've been robbing a bank!"

Fair dipped a hand into a pail of water and rubbed the notes, and then held up his inky fingers. "Bogus money," he corrected. "Here is where they made the money you heard the people of Topeka talking about. Agger not only robs and kills, but he prints this stuff."

As he finished and before Watt could restrain him he was showering blows with the back of the ax on the press.

"Quit it!" remonstrated Watt. "The authorities will need the press for evidence."

"From what I've heard I don't believe the courts and sheriff would convict the worst murderer in the territory on any amount of evidence," retorted Fair.

And he delivered a final, smashing blow at the press.

Mumbling further criticism of his friend's hasty methods Watt took the candle and proceeded with a closer examination of the cave. A strong-box of oak, studded with brass nails and secured with a padlock and heavy chains, was unearthed from beneath a pile of new blankets. It challenged the Southerner's curiosity.

"Here's work for the woodsman," he invited.

"What about evidence?" queried Fair.

"No evidence till we get inside of it."

Fair quickly demolished the top of the

box, or chest, with a few blows of the ax. After Watt had wrenched the shivered fragments loose the two beheld considerable treasure in the shape of gold ornaments and a quantity of gold coins. Neither cared to touch the sad evidences of many raids. From cabin and store, from individuals and west-bound wagons, the rings and breastpins, the chains and watches had been taken. Each of the wide-eyed investigators fancied he could see blood on every piece of jewelry and on every coin.

"That's what I call blood-money!" shivered Fair. "The inhuman ——s!"

Watt stared fixedly at the loot and without turning his head declared in a dull voice—

"I know I shall kill Crow Agger."

"Let some one else kill him," muttered Fair. "We've done the next worse thing for him. Let's get out. This place is awful; it chokes me."

"He can't have this stuff," said Watt. "He's committed more than one murder to get it. But he sha'n't have it."

He spread a blanket and dumped the contents of the box into it and tied the corners together and carried it into the cabin. "I'll turn it over to the citizens of Topeka, or throw it into some crick, but while waiting for a bloody death Agger sha'n't have this particular parcel of stealings."

"Have it your own way," sighed Fair, the air of the cave and cabin making him impatient to get outdoors and into the clean night wind. "We've got the saddle. He can keep the horse. We've killed his dogs, broken up his bogus-money game and taken away his stolen jewelry and money. He's paying high for that horse."

"We'll add to the price by burning this nest to the ground."

Fair stepped to the open door and drank in the night air. The stars twinkled palely, quite unmindful of the evil being enacted in Kansas; the frogs could be heard booming out their ancient water-song along the creek bottom, the shrill staccato barking of the coyotes still encircled the double cabin.

"All right," at last agreed Fair. "We'll burn the place. Didn't relish the notion at first, as it's well-built and might make a good home for decent folks. But there's something so unclean about it——"

Watt extinguished the candle and sprang to the doorway and thrust out his head to listen. The rapid drumming of horses' hoofs was clearly audible.

"Run!" ejaculated Fair.

"Too late!" cried Watt, pulling him inside the door. "They've quit the grass and are traveling on the ledge. They're here!"

And he closed the door and dropped the stout bar in place as out of the night galloped a band of horsemen.

"We could have run for it," panted Fair, his stomach developing a nervous, uneasy feeling that bordered on nausea.

"Too close. Find that candle and take it to the cave and light it. We must see to collect the guns and load them."

The horseman swirled up on the tiny plateau and the croaking voice of Agger shouted—

"Hi, Mamie!"

The band dismounted and some of the men made for the second cabin, leaving their animals for the horse-guard to picket. Receiving no answer Agger impatiently called out—

"Come here, Mamie. See what I've fetched you."

His failure to elicit a response now attracted the attention of his men, who grinned broadly in the darkness, for Agger and his woman did not always live tranquilly together.

"None of your —— sulks!" roared Agger, striding to the door and attempting to open it. Then came a streak of profanity and threats, topped off with the warning:

"You cut up any didoes with Crow Agger and you'll be mighty sorry, girl. I fetched you a nice present. Why don't you open the door? We seen your light."

"Where's the dawgs, Crow?" asked one of the men as the leader waited for his woman's voice.

"By ——! That's so! Where are they?" muttered Agger, rubbing his shaggy head in bewilderment. "Never come home before without them knowing I was coming before I fetched within half a mile of the place."

He forgot his woman and whistled for his dogs.

"You can't git a yip from 'em," said a man in amazement.

Agger hastily retreated from the door, sensing danger. It was instinct rather than reason that was trying to warn him.

"See here, Mamie; you try any tricks on me and I'll leave a mark on you," he threatened, but putting no force into his speech. "You've been too —— friendly with some of the settlers. I've let you run round too much. But you know this funny business won't do. You open that door to once. And what you done to my dawgs?"

From curiosity and grim amusement at what they had assumed to be a domestic difference between Agger and the woman the gang now turned to entertaining vague suspicions. Those who had entered the second cabin now came out. One of the group said:

"Chief, there's some one in there with her."

"—— you. Bodge! Don't you go for to make cheap talk that a-way!" raged Agger.

"Then some one is in there alone. We see the light," persisted Bodge.

"What I'm thinking of is; what's happened to the dawgs," piped up the shrill voice of Snipe Kinny.

The last switched Agger from anger to lively apprehension. Even if his lady-love were untrue to him the dogs would never be lacking in loyalty. He was their master; and although he returned with hands wet with murder and should beat them unmercifully they would yet fawn and cringe about him. And never did he return home without hearing their deep welcome long before he could make his thick voice cover the distance. Some one was in the cabin. His woman and his dogs refused to heed his call. He felt a prickling of the flesh as he backed softly to the group before the door of the second cabin. His voice was unsteady as he whispered—

"Boys, something's wrong in there."

"Posse in there. Mebbe some of Lane's men. Or Ol' Brown's," one man suggested.

"They'd ripped us full of lead when we rode up," muttered Bodge. "Something is wrong, but it ain't no posse."

"Powerful queer about them dawgs," whined Snipe Kinny.

"Mamie may have gone riding and took 'em with her," muttered Agger, but believing nothing of the sort.

"Then who's in there, chief?" demanded Bodge.

All waited for the leader to announce his plan of action. Agger's control of the gang was based on his ability to confront the unexpected. There was scarcely a man in his band who was not much stronger than he physically, but there was none who could compare with him in cunning. He realized the importance of the moment to his leadership; and with his old bruskness he issued his commands.

"Bodge, you sneak to the south side of the cabin and make lots of noise. Keep out of range of the window. If any one calls out to you, keep 'em talking. The rest of you pick up that log out front, three to a side, but first pull off your boots so's you can move soft-like. Line up at the door, swing her three times and let her rip. I'll be with you with both guns out. When the door gives pile inside with knife and gun. Bodge, when you hear the log hit the door you come on the run."

If any of the men had suspected Crow Agger of wavering they were now confident he was back in the saddle. Boots were quickly removed and crouching low the six men stole to the end of the second cabin and picked up a long oak log. Bodge stumbled to the rear of the besieged cabin and called loudly for imaginary followers to keep at his heels. He displayed quite a bit of cleverness by speaking in Snipe Kinny's shrill voice and in shifting to the vocal characteristics of other members of the gang. While he played these various rôles the six men stole to the door with the long log between them. The log was swung three times, the third forward movement ending when the heavy butt crashed against the door. The door groaned and creaked; but Agger himself had directed its construction and had planned it to be assault proof.

"Again!" shouted Agger.

The log swung twice, then came a spurt of flame from the window and one of the head men jumped wildly. The timber fell to the ground as the men scattered and raced out of range.

"Some one's in there," babbled Snipe Kinny.

"You —— fool! Don't we know it?" hoarsely shouted Agger. "But they'll come out heels first." For the further benefit of the besieged he raised his voice and warned—

"And whoever 'tis in there they'll wished they'd died young and in bed."

"Any one hit by that shot?" anxiously inquired Bodge, who had arrived just as the assault on the door was abandoned.

Agger choked off his curses to run over the names of his men. When the roll-call was finished he snarled:

"Joey don't answer. Where's Joey?"

"He was ahead of me on the log," mumbled one of the men.

"Git your boots on. They must have bagged Joey," said Agger. "I'll give 'em a hoot."

While his men were resuming their footgear he stole along the side of the second cabin and dodged into the opening between the two buildings and gained the corner of his own cabin. Remaining there he sharply called out:

"You, inside there! Speak up and name your business. What's happened to my dawgs and my woman? What you want in a honest man's home?"

The sound of a heavy body falling close to the door sent him dodging back behind the corner with a navy revolver in each hand. To his men he hoarsely called out:

"Hear that? Joey's wounded and trying to git away."

As he spoke there was a repetition of the sound. It was audible to all, and Bodge exclaimed—

"By ——, that's tough! Joey's fell down again."

There were more disturbing noises, evidencing to the gang that the absent member was having difficulty in withdrawing. But what puzzled Agger and his men was the lack of progress made by the wounded man. Apparently he had strength sufficent to gain his feet and fall heavily, but was unable to roll away from the log. And even more bewildering was Joey's reticence in calling on his comrades to rescue him.

Agger again called out:

"You, inside there. You've hurt one of my men most cruel. Will you hold your fire till we git him away?"

"Take away your dead," replied a muffled voice.

A shiver traversed Agger's spine, although he knew the unknown was speaking for rhetorical effect. Very obviously a man must be far from dead who could repeatedly gain his feet and then fall heavily on the hard ground.

"Kinny, take a man and go and fetch Joey back here," commanded the leader.

Kinny was not eager to succor his fallen comrade, and replied:

"Yes, and git a hunk of lead in the guts. If Joey can tumble 'round like that, let him tumble out of range."

"You're nearest, chief. You give him a hand," an anonymous voice advised.

With a roar of animal rage Agger thrust fear from him long enough to run along the side of the cabin, hugging the logs, until by the door. Still crouching low he took a step toward the log, tripped against something and fell and dropped both revolvers. Scrambling madly back to the wall he waited until he could control his breathing, then stretched himself flat in the direction of the unseen obstacle. He recovered his weapons and was content to remain quiet for a moment.

"Take away your dead. We'll give you three minutes," warned Watt from behind the door.

Although blinded by rage and fear the desperado felt the pricks of memory. One of the brain-cells strictly devoted to remembering voices endeavored to tell him who was speaking. But his state of mind was too confused for him to understand the message. He vaguely knew he had at some time heard a voice like that of the man in the cabin. Reaching out a hand he located the thing he had tripped against. At almost the first contact his groping fingers were resting on a broad leather collar.

"Blackie!" he gasped as he drew the dead animal to the wall. "Blackie here, and dead!"

He was astounded at the discovery. He explored farther and dragged back a second dog.

"Cherokee! Best of the lot," he groaned.

"Your time is slipping away. Two minutes left," warned the voice behind the logs.

Maddened by the death of his pets, whom he loved more than he did his woman, he forgot his fears and stepping from the wall worked rapidly. As he dragged the fourth animal to cover he found Bodge waiting there, ready to help.

"Take 'em away," he muttered. "There's one more."

"What about Joey?" reminded Bodge.

"To —— with Joey!" gritted Agger. "My dawgs was my best friends."

Yet on his next essay he brought back the dead man and the last of his brute friends.

When he rejoined his men he had nothing to say at first. They stood in a silent group, staring down at the dark mound of dead canines and the indefinite figure they knew was all that remained of Joey. Agger was concentrating his thoughts on revenge, considering and rejecting various forms of horrible reprisal. His brooding was interrupted by a voice from the cabin, commanding:

"You men out there. Take to your horses and ride away. We shall begin firing at once."

"Where's my woman?" yelled Agger. "Did you kill her along with my dawgs?"

"She's not here. No harm has come to her that we know of. You have half a minute to mount and get out of range."

"By ——! I know him now!" triumphantly cried Agger, all his ferocious courage returning once the mystery of the situation was solved. "The cowardly skunk! It's the Southern dandy that slipped out of our hands at Westport. Boys, there can't be more'n two or three of 'em. They've killed my dawgs, but they won't outlive 'em many minutes longer. Kinny and Pelks, git inside your cabin and pour lead through the end winder. Bodge, take a man and pepper the back winder. Rest of you boys take cover with me out front. If we catch 'em alive we'll roast 'em and nail their scalps to their cabin down on the crick."

"Same two we went after down there. Can't be more'n two of 'em," cackled Kinny. "It'll be easy to make wolf-bait of 'em."

Watt and Fair, crouching in the mouth of the cave, learned of Agger's tactics when a stream of bullets whipped through the blanket covering the end window and struck against the fireplace rocks and riccocheted shrilly. The tinkling of glass and the thud of bullets striking the logs told of more lead cutting across the room from the side windows. The interior of the cabin was crisscrossed by lines of death. The defenders were quite safe, however, as long as they remained inside the cave opening, as only a deflected bullet could reach them there.

"If we can hold them off till daylight we'll have a chance," muttered Watt. "They built these cabins out here in the open so the gang couldn't be cooped up."

"The blankets and lounge cover are slit to ribbons already," remarked Fair.

Then he visualized the room as he recalled it on his former visit, and added:

"I can get to the end of the room by crawling on the floor. There must be a shutter for that end window—for all the windows. I'm going to try it."

The fire from the second cabin ceased for a few moments and Fair crawled rapidly to the rear wall. Watt stood erect in the mouth of the cave and held the candle above his head. Aided by the dim light Fair quickly discovered the thick shutter, bulletproof, leaning against the logs and ready for instant use. A bullet from the second cabin glanced from the corner of the fireplace and shaved by Watt's head, but he remained in the doorway while Fair climbed on a chair and fitted the shutter between the two cleats and easily shoved it across the blanketed opening. As Fair dropped back to the floor the bullets from Kinny's and Pelks' rifles smashed harmlessly into the triple thickness of oak.

"Good work, Enoch. Stay right there," Watt softly called as he placed the candle on the floor. "There's a shutter beneath the window on my left. I'm going after it."

Hugging the floor Watt crawled to the shutter and rose to his feet at one side of the window. Kinny and Pelks had warned their companions of what the occupants of the cabin were about to do and an unusually heavy fire was concentrated on the north window. Watt coolly inserted the shutter between the cleats, then tore away the lounge covering and pushed the thick square across the window. Yells of rage greeted this successful maneuver and Agger could be heard ordering the men to rush to the south side of the building and fire through the remaining window at close range. Fair darted forward and snatched up the shutter and jammed it into position a few seconds ahead of the heavy volley.

If the desperadoes' wrath was high, so was their courage. Watt scowled as one of the outlaws pounded the butt of his rifle against oak screen, and told Fair:

"This must be stopped. They'll be battering their way in if we don't fight back."

"We've paid them back for what they tried to do to you outside of Westport as well as for their visit to our cabin," said Fair. "But I don't like this being shut up. We're like blind men. There's nothing to stop them from burning us out if they want to."

"I've been expecting that. We'd have to get back to the cave."

"And stifle if we didn't roast first."

"Always ready with a dish of cold water to throw on my hopes, Old Sober Face," ruefully reflected Watt. "Only thing to do is to teach them to respect us by fighting back. Sorry we didn't plug that Agger when he was hauling his dead dogs away."

"He was after his dead. We couldn't do that."

More pounding sounded on the shutter over the south widow, the sash of which had long since been shot to pieces.

"We've got to make a move," growled Watt. "There must be some loopholes in these walls. Agger wouldn't arrange to block his windows without providing some means of returning an enemy's fire. The walls are tightly chinked and are light-proof. Let's take the candle and investigate."

Their examination revealed three loopholes in the north wall, two on the south side, and one in the east, or end wall. These were securely sealed with solid blocks of wood. Short oak bars, held in place by iron cleats, prevented an enemy on the outside from dislodging them. Watt leaned three Sharps rifles against the holes on the north side and then placed the candle inside the cave opening and closed the door. The interior of the cabin was now in complete darkness. Fair pulled a bar back and removed the plug. Watt thrust a rifle barrel through the opening and waited for the flash of a gun to betray the position of an enemy.

The firing had ceased and there was no further attempt to break in the window shutters. The desperadoes were loudly calling back and forth and the men began returning to the north side of the cabin. Agger was outlining his next offensive maneuver without any attempt at concealment.

"We must git 'em before daylight," he was telling his men. "That door must come down."

Watt aimed in the direction of the voice and waited until the leader spoke again, and then fired.

The shot took the besiegers by surprize and incited two to shoot back before they had realized the uselessness of the act and the risk they were taking. Watt fired at one of the flashes and was showered with curses by a man nursing a notched ear. He fired again and could hear the scrambling retreat of heavy boots as the men ran to the side of the second cabin.

"They've found the loopholes, Crow!" wailed Snipe Kinny. "Busting in the door won't work."

As Watt withdrew his rifle Fair inserted the block and made it secure and felt his way to the end of the room. He had no difficulty in locating the one loophole. Resting his head against the wall he heard a slight scraping noise and felt the plug under his hand give a little. Watt joined him and was warned to stand to one side. Seizing the end of the bar with his left hand and holding his revolver ready he uncovered the block. He could feel it gently being pushed from place, and as it fell to the floor he discharged the hand-gun through the hole. With a mighty bellow of pain the fellow on the outside dropped his rifle and staggered to one side with a bullet through his shoulder. It required but a moment to replace the plug and the bar.

It was Bodge who declared—

"We must burn the cabins."

"Not by a —— sight!" snarled Agger. "There's only two of them. They fooled Joey by making believe they was riding to Topeka. Just turned round and trailed him back here and laid low till we'd rode off. When they're dead they can't tell what they know, and we'll still have the best place in the territory to work in. There's one trick you're forgetting."

A brief pause, and then Bodge was slowly replying:

"No, I ain't forgetting. But who'll take the lead?"

"Keep your trap shut. We'll talk it over in the men's cabin. You men watch both sides of the cabin mighty sharp."

This much of the conversation was perfectly audible to Watt and Fair, and the latter was inclined to believe it was an attempt to frighten them into making a desperate sally. Watt did not hold with his friend. He insisted:

"There's something about this place we haven't learned. Let's take another look at the cave. There may be another entrance."

"Then why didn't they use it the first thing?" asked Fair. "We'll find nothing new in there."

Yet he was anxious to make sure, and the two felt their way to the door and stepped inside and picked up the candle.

A hasty survey of the walls and roofs satisfied both there was only the one entrance to the cave. Watt was still convinced that Agger was about to make a surprize attack from an entirely unsuspected quarter;

and taking the candle into the cabin he made a minute inspection of the floor. This was made of broad shakes laid on cottonwood logs and unusually weather-tight for a Kansas cabin. From the wall Watt secured a bowie-knife and lifted up several shakes and worked the blade of the knife between the logs. In each attempt he succeeded in striking the ledge.

"There's no hole under the floor," he finally admitted. "Yet I'm positive they're up to some new game."

Fair could not conceive of any hidden point of attack; and what his logical mind failed to comprehend he ousted from his thoughts. Curiously enough Watt, who was always inclined to optimism and ever eager to take a reckless chance, remained much perturbed even after finding only the solid ledge under the flooring. He even passed around the three walls and looked for secret doors sawn through the logs.

"We're in here and can't get out," said Fair as his friend gave up his search. "And they can't get in. We have arms and ammunition and plenty of food. But there's only the one pail of water—the one in the cave. If they don't burn us out before daylight we'll drive them to cover. If it wasn't for fire we could laugh at them all Summer."

"I may be an old woman," muttered Watt, glaring suspiciously about the room. "But I can't shake off the feeling we're going to be jumped, and jumped hard. Let's get back into the cave."

OUTSIDE Agger was perfecting his last plan for capturing the cabin and destroying the inmates. After his conference with Bodge in the men's cabin he gathered his men about him and, whispering softly so that no word might be overheard, announced:

"Me and Bodge and Pelks will make the dash. One of us must open the door. Rest of you be ready to pile in and finish anything we've left alive. When I toss a bit of rock on the roof of the second cabin the rest of you make a big racket between the two cabins. Start a fire near the logs and make it smoke. There's only one hole for them to shoot through and if you keep out of range you won't be hit. When you hear us hoot you all run to the door. One of us will git the bar clear."

While those who were to make the demonstration between the cabins were searching for bits of fuel Agger and his two men cautiously made their way some distance north and mounted the sharp acclivity that would bring them to the top of the ledge. Then they approached the cabins as Watt and Fair had done. As a further precaution the three men removed their boots. They carried no rifles as they would fight at close quarters. In their bare feet, for they scorned to wear socks, they began the descent of the ledge, taking great care to dislodge no detritus. So carefully did they work down the face of the ledge that they arrived at the roof without making any telltale sound. Agger whispered for Bodge and Pelks to keep off the roof until he was ready to lead the way. Then finding a bit of rock he threw it on to the roof of the men's cabin and waited.

Almost immediately the voices of the men below were raised in a loud clamor. Then came the crackling of burning branches and the smell of smoke. A rosy glow showed on each side of the opening beneath the connecting roof.

Watt was the first to sniff the smoke and bounded from the cave in alarm.

"They've come to it at last!" he gritted. "They're burning us out!"

"We'll fall back to the cave. I'll never go out and be shot."

As all the noise was being made between the two cabins Watt leaped to the end of the room and placed his face against the logs. He could hear the snapping of cottonwood branches. The smoke was filtering in through the broken window and around the oak shutter.

"Pile it on boys!" shouted a desperado. "We'll soon have the —— skunks well roasted."

Drawing his revolver Watt removed the short bar and pulled out the loophole plug and fired three shots. Yells of derision rewarded this effort, and before he could guard against it a long rifle barrel was thrust through the opening and sent a red flash of flame into the room. Seizing a heavy chair and stepping back from the wall Watt smashed the solid frame against the muzzle of the rifle and knocked it back through the loophole to damage the owner's shoulder. This time there were no jeers; only curses and groans. Before a second gun could be introduced the block was back in place and clamped tight by the bar.

Watt darted back to where Fair stood in the opening to the cave and cried:

"They'll soon have the logs ablaze. Hear that! Now they're chopping with an ax."

"Timber's well-seasoned. It'll burn," Fair agreed. "But they'll have work doing anything with an ax. I don't like it."

"I told you they'd try something new!"

"The fire and chopping isn't new," insisted Fair. "They're wasting too much breath unless they're trying to hide some other move. Why should they shout and yell like crazy men? It's to keep our attention on that end of the cabin. Do you hear Agger's voice? And if they plan to burn us out why do they bother to use an ax? None of them like work."

Watt puckered his brows and tilted his head in an effort to follow the ferocious threats.

"Not more than three or four men making any noise. Same voices all the time. You're right about the ax. That part of it is all a bluff."

They stepped clear of the cave doorway and Fair whispered—

"I believe the fire is a bluff."

Watt gave a little start and clapped a hand to his shoulder and brought away a small piece of bark in his hand. He held it up to the candle-light; then advanced his lips close to Fair's ear and whispered:

"It's all a game. Fire and ax. It's the roof. Real danger is there."

And he lifted his revolver.

Fair caught his arm and drew him back a step and murmured:

"We've discovered the danger-point you were fussing about. They plan to come through the roof while we're at the other end of the room with our attention taken up by those men making the fire."

Watt raised the candle above his head and studied the roof carefully. He believed he detected a slight motion along the ridge-pole.

"Some sort of a trap-door," he whispered. "They got on to the roof from the ledge."

The next moment he darted to the fireplace and raked out what was left of the coals into the middle of the floor. Snatching up the botany book he tore out the remaining pages and dropped them on the coals. Back to Fair's side he sprang just as two sections of the roof began moving outward from the ridge pole to leave an opening on each side of the pole. Before Watt and Fair could set themselves to repulse an onslaught two men dropped into the room and were instantly followed by a third.

The paper, now bursting into flames, confused the outlaws for a second. Fair forgot he held the ax in his hand, and with a drive of his fist sent one of the ruffians tumbling on his neck and shoulders. Instantly the remaining two reacted and went into action. Watt leaped back to gain the cave and a sweep of Agger's knife ripped the breast out of his shirt. At the same moment Bodge discharged his gun at Fair, the bullet striking and flattening against the head of the ax as it rested against the young man's breast. With no time to shift his grasp, which was close to the metal, Fair dashed the ax against the fellow's head, catching him on the temple and crushing the skull. While this was happening Agger lunged a second time with the bowie-knife, missed, and attempted to fire his revolver. But Watt was a second ahead, firing from the hip, the bullet catching the desperado under the chin and emerging through the top of his head.

With a warning yell Fair leaped forward and flung the ax and caught Pelks across the neck, snapping it like a pipe-stem, even while the outlaw's hand was beginning to raise the heavy bar.

Outside the door the remainder of the gang were yowling like timber-wolves. Fair discharged a gun at the door, seized Watt by the arm and hauled him beneath the opening in the roof and commanded. "Through the hole on the south side. Slide to the ground. Quick!"

And again he fired the gun, then kicked over a table and hurled a chair across the room, and shouted and swore hoarse oaths, and made enough noise for half a dozen men in deadly combat. Watt leaped upward and caught the edge of the opening and drew himself through it and reached down a hand to aid Fair. He felt his wrist grasped firmly and pulled mightily and brought his friend flying out on the roof and shook his hand free as a new danger presented itself. One of the bandits had been boosted to the roof and was crawling up to learn just what was taking place inside the cabin, and why the bar had not been removed. Fair, unable to stay his rapid progress, pitched violently off the south side of the roof head-first just as Watt hurled his heavy hand-gun and knocked the newcomer senseless.

The unconscious man slipped backward. From the ground some one yelled:

"Why in —— don't you say something? What you coming down for?"

The fellow slipped faster and fell on the head of another outlaw who was being boosted to the eaves. By that time Watt was on the ground and dragging his insensible friend away.

The coals, raked from the fireplace by Watt, now had eaten deep enough into the floor to secure a hold, and yellow flames streamed up and sent a ruddy column of light through the double door in the roof.

"They're all still! They're all dead!" shrieked the fellow who had been knocked down by the unconscious man.

"Cap'n Agger! Bodge! Pelks! Why don't you answer?"

Watt puffed for breath as he worked southward to round the ledge, and striving with every ounce of energy to get beyond the betraying firelight before some of the ruffians should discover their escape and think to run around the buildings. Fair's heels trailed behind him and his body slumped limply.

"Enoch! For God's sake wake up! You're not dead!" moaned Watt.

Fair threw up a hand clutched his arm.

"What is it?" foolishly mumbled.

"Thank God!" hysterically cried Watt, halting and drawing his friend up until he could get one limp arm across his shoulders.

Fair's head continued to sag and roll in a drunken manner, and yet he managed to assist Watt by taking shuffling steps. As they directed their course to the west to find their horses Fair's vacant gaze caught a glimpse of the blazing cabins—for the second had soon caught.

"Seasoned timber," he mumbled. "They burn fine."

"Aye! —— them, Old Sober Face. Let them all burn. We didn't get the saddle, nor the horse. But never did a gang pay a dearer price for stolen property. Oh, Lord! But wasn't I scared when you pitched off head first and wouldn't speak when I jumped down after you!"

"Where are our horses? My head feels smashed to pieces. We'll ride just a little ways—then rest," sighed Fair.

With his arm thrown across Watt's shoulders he mechanically fought his way through grass that grasped his hips and endeavored to haul him down. Behind them the sky looked blue because of the bright light from the blazing cabins. The structures were hidden from view by the ledge, but for miles and miles the settlers in that part of the territory would see the glow and wonder what new outrage was being perpetrated. Then a horse whinnied ahead and Watt softly cried—

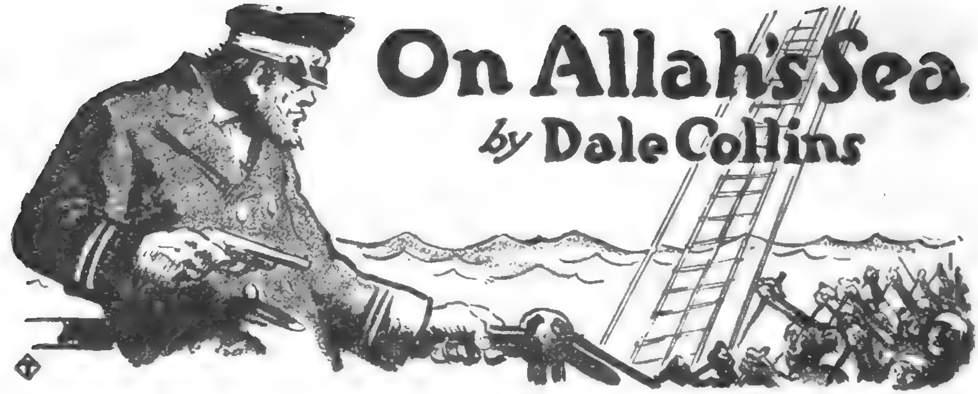
"Our horses!"

With a groan of relief Fair gave up the fight and collapsed on his face.

TO BE CONTINUED

On Allah's Sea

by Dale Collins



Author of "The Rat Trap."

IT IS the will of Allah that all believers should visit Mecca, and it was the will of Captain Patrick Doolan that as many as could be crammed aboard should make the pilgrimage by the *Anita*. He owned the *Anita*, and though few would have envied him his possession, Captain Doolan made the most of her. Into that crazy tramp—which, men said, was only held together by rust—he had crammed three thousand pilgrims, and her tonnage was seven thousand.

Allah might have been well-pleased by the sight of the *Anita* pounding away across the steamy waters with Java astern and Jeddah—that is Mecca's port—far, far ahead. Captain Doolan certainly was. But she remained an eyesore on the face of the waters, and her officers groaned, while even the patient pilgrims, buoyed by the thought of merit hereafter, were in poor temper. She stained sea and air as she went. She was an animated hulk encrusted with odorous humanity.

The sun beat down upon her deck, where the passengers squatted so closely that the rusty iron could not be seen between their brown bodies. The holds were open, and below were more and more men intent upon sanctity but not at all interested in sanitation. When the third mate said that there was a green canopy of smells above them he stated the case mildly.

On a thousand tiny braziers rice cooked all day long, and handfuls of pungent dried fish sizzled. Looking down from the ramshackle bridge it seemed the heat of those closely packed bodies had set the ship burning.

Captain Doolan stood up there watching her nosing along. He rubbed his hands to express satisfaction.

"Biggest crowd she's ever carried," he remarked for the sixth time to the mate. "Faith, who'd ever think you'd get so many haythen in so little space. It takes a man like Pat Doolan to run pilgrims!"

"That's so," the mate said moodily, but he did not share the skipper's sense of triumph.

On his first trip as owner and master of the *Anita*, Captain Doolan was not popular. He was keen and bullying and hard and grim. His big red paws were always grabbing and cuffing and snatching, his red-veined eyes were watchful for chances to screw some new profit from, or impose some fresh economy on, the *Anita;* his rusty red head went flaming from bow to stern to light the fires of hate. Pilgrim-running is no white man's job, and under bullying Captain Doolan it became penal servitude.

"Three thousand haythen!" he gloated.

"And stinkin' like three million!" sighed the mate.

"It's me that's got a good idea. There they are with their passages paid—and little enough and all when you think how far we've got to carry 'em—and their own *compredors* to feed them for a song, and nothing to do at all at all save gamble. And this here is my good idea, mister: We must put down this sinful gambling, and we'd better make a charge for water!"

The mate started at the suggestion. His jaw dropped. He stared at the big Irishman hoping that he jested. Seeing the skipper was in earnest, he urged:

"I'd go easy, sir! If you stop them

gambling they'll have nothing at all to keep them out of mischief. As for the water—well, you took them in the understanding that they get supplies without charge, and they'll expect you to stick to that. We'll be having a mutiny or some-such!"

"Mister, mister, you're overcautious to be ever hoping to be owning a craft of your own as I do. Being a Christian man I must grind down the faces of the haythen, and that's where the money is, m'boy. By the saints, will they miss a small charge—say a cent a gallon, now? Yet won't that mount up fine in the mass. Faith, it'll pay better than their passages!"

"They're queer cattle, pilgrims," the mate warned him stubbornly. "You're going contrary to your word, and to custom!"

But Captain Doolan cursed him for a fool.

"They're haythen, and there's no law at all at all for haythen on the high seas. As a Christian man I know what's good for me. You, mister, why you're nought but a big gazop!"

He paced the bridge chuckling. Presently he sent for the chief *compredor*,[*] and that suave and polite Chinese appeared, bowing and clicking his tongue.

"Yes, cap-it-ain?" he asked.

"Look here, Ah Loo, you haythen," said the skipper bruskly, "this here is a Christian ship, and all this gambling's got to stop. No more gambling after tomorrow, you savee? If I catch any more of 'em playing for money I grab the cash, and that's the truth. Catch on? Any money stop along gambling stop along me!"

The *compredor* raised yellow hands in protest.

"Cap-it-ain, no can stop gambling. No can do! Suppose they no gamble they fight—fight—all time!"

"Very good, you old haythen, and it's me that won't be talking again. Don't say I didn't warn you. And another thing, they're drinking too much water, savee? From tomorrow they're going to pay one cent a gallon suppose they want drink. No can do for nothing, savee?"

The yellow face grew sickly white; the yellow hands went out again in protest and appeal, the slit eyes contracted and then grew wide. Ah Loo broke into a torrent of words—urging the captain's pledge, all past custom and the pilgrims' poverty. But Captain Doolan was obdurate.

"They make plenty fight," chanted the *compredor*. "They come fighting against you, sir, in many numbers. They make, sir—how you say, cap-it-ain? ——'s bells. That is true, sir. They make murder with knife!"

The conviction with which he spoke was disconcerting, but the skipper took the Chinese by the neck.

"Off this bridge wi' you!" he roared. "I'll kick you into the sea, you yellow dog!"

The *compredor* fled, and Captain Doolan squared his broad shoulders and stumped about. The mate, looking upon the hordes of colored men, found courage to speak again.

"He may be right, sir. Sure as —— we'll have trouble, and what can half a dozen do against three thousand?"

"Aw, by the saints, you make me fair sick! Who am I, a Christian man, to be afeered of all the hordes of the haythen? Have you no decency, boy? Haven't you got any religion?"

He went to his cabin, still roaring indignantly, and the fresh-faced second joined the mate, having heard the latter part of the address.

"He's tough," he said with a certain admiration. "I do believe he'd take on the whole of Asia!"

"He would!" the mate agreed, rubbing at his long nose. "But the trouble is we'll have to share in the brawl, and it won't be long coming either. Listen to what he's about!"

The second listened and even his boyish face grew serious.

"——," he commented, "but that's rank unjust!"

"Yes, but like as not he'll get away with it. The sea's a fine place for rogues, sonny. I've seen enough of it to know that. If he was in the right and a bit afraid of them they'd knife him sure as life. As he doesn't care a whoop for the whole boiling and is wrong, he's like enough to pull the trick. Queer, ain't it? But that's the way of the sea. There's no morals in it!"

His glance roved back to the crowded, stinking deck.

SWIFTLY the *Anita* was transformed from an oven crammed with baking humanity into a pot heated to boiling-point, steamy and full of ugly bubblings.

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[*] Head man; go-between.

About their braziers the pilgrims squatted, and their incessant chattering rose high and angry, hands gesticulated and angry looks darted again and again at the bridge. The ship shivered with the travail of the weary engines, but there was a new throb in her, also, engendered by the anger of three thousand men. New influences are at work in Asia, because strange tides flow down from Red Russia to teach that all men are equal—that brown is as good as white, and better because there is more of him. Asia rumbles and stirs. Even those pilgrims bound upon a religious duty handed down from olden days had not escaped the influences of the red river flowing from Russia. They wanted their rights, and hands closed upon kris and knife against the oppressors of the masses. Firebrands were busy with heating speeches.

The mate read all this. He had past experience of pilgrims which the captain lacked. He knew the ship was a volcano. Consideration of their position left him with the conviction that the skipper was mad. He presented himself before him again.

"There's mischief brewing, sir," he reported. "There's —— murder written all over them. For the love of —— don't try to go on with this business."

Unimpressed by his earnestness the skipper rose from his chair—a mountainous, fiery, grim man.

"Mister, you're no Christian to stand there taking God's name in vain by asking me to bow the knee to haythen. This is going through. Here—" he opened a drawer and drew out revolvers— "if you're afraid you'd best take guns and give 'em to the other two and the engineer! 'Tis mighty poor stuff you are! Shoot 'em down, the dogs, if they make trouble. I'm not in this business for the good of anybody's health!"

Because he knew their peril, the mate took the guns without comment and went away. But he cursed Fate for sending him on such a run with such a skipper. For, in his way, Captain Doolan was mad, he mused. Queer the number of skippers that were. Mad on one point or another, particularly on these coolie tubs out East! Whisky, or heat, or fever, or greed, or women, or a mixture of the lot, and there they were—often red-faced and strong enough physically but quite unbalanced in the head. They remained skippers, however, and it remained the business of poor —— like him to obey them.

He served the weapons out, but felt none the happier, since five men may not shoot three thousand before Death takes them by the throat.

Later he called Ah Loo and another *compredor* and held council with them. Their news was far from encouraging. They feared the worst and told him so, with grave apologies and bows. And then Ah Loo made a suggestion, after a pause in which his cunning old eyes searched the mate's face.

"Sir," he said smoothly, "would it not be much more better for you and all of us supposing the cap-it-ain die quick and sudden. Better one death than many, sir, and many death come soon. A knife could get the cap-it-ain quick, supposing no trouble afterward. We could then go happy, sir!"

He fixed his hopeful eyes upon the mate, and his fellow made clicking sounds of endorsement. But, though he knew in his heart that there was much to commend the suggestion and he was too hardened to be shocked by it, the mate was loyal and his face darkened.

"Look here, Ah Loo, you old ruffian," he said coldly, "don't talk that fashion, see? The captain is a *tuan,** and *tuans* hold together. Touch him and you touch us all. If it comes to killing we can shoot you down in droves!"

Ah Loo was disappointed, but not impressed.

"We do not wish the fighting, sir," he answered, "but there are plenty too many of us. Fair deal does not stop along cap-it-ain. We cannot stop this trouble."

The *compredors* bowed low again, and the yellow tide swallowed them. The mate walked back to the bridge through scowling ranks of Orientals. He found the skipper there.

"Well, I've fixed those haythen up!" Captain Doolan said triumphantly. "All water's shut off, and when they want it they must go to the *compredors* for it, and, faith, it's cheap. They don't seem pleased somehow."

"No," the mate agreed unhappily, "they do not!"

"Ah, they'll get over that. You mark me words, mister; I'm saying they'll get over that!"

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* White man.

Though the mate nodded, he did not believe. Captain Doolan turned away suddenly and raced down the ladder. Watching from the bridge they saw him pass through the yellow sea like a battleship, thrusting men aside and trampling upon them. Reaching the hold he sprang down into it without a moment's hesitation. Excited chattering broke out all over the well-deck, and the onlookers above held their breath. But Captain Doolan's red head reappeared, and with a bullying swagger he marched back and up on to the bridge.

"——, and it's only chicken feed, it is!" he announced. "But even that'll mount up before the trip's over."

He thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out a fistful of guilders and dollars.

"They ran like rats when I jumped down among them. They didn't wait to pick up their money, the haythen. I scooped the lot, indeed!"

He laughed happily, but his mirth found no echo, and when he left them the mate turned to the younger officers.

"This ain't no laughing matter," he said. "Sure as —— we're going to have a blow-up. I'll try and reason with him when I get a chance, and we'll see how things go today. If things get any worse we'll have to—have to——"

He paused, nonplussed. He could see no way out. Angrily he cried:

"——, it isn't right! Here he is skipper and owner and all —— Almighty aboard this craft—and yet mad as a rat. What the —— *can* we do?"

They didn't know. There is so little that is possible in such circumstances at sea. There is no policeman standing on the corner. The man who puts his captain in chains takes a horrible risk. His every instinct is against such blasphemy, and should the act be judged unjustified all men will condemn him and ruin will be his bride. The mate looked at the callow boys; the boys looked at the mate. They were aware of many cunning angry eyes fixed upon them. On every hand the Indian Ocean stretched level and oily.

THE day passed on a note of tension and expectation. Men fretted and moved restlessly, talking in whispers or chattering shrilly; hands closed upon revolver butts and the hafts of knives; eyes were watchful. The heat was intense. At intervals the captain went his rounds roaring and threatening and stirring fresh dissension. He raided another gambling-school. He cursed the heathen. Though his mountainous, gnarled body passed unscathed, beneath his feet the brew of death he had mixed boiled and bubbled.

Sunset came. The prayers of the Faithful cried to Allah-il-Allah. The unceasing babel of the East resumed. The darkness flooded from beyond the horizon. The waters swirled in phosphorescent glory along the sides, whispering and chuckling. From the bridge the night seemed to be full of eyes—the eyes of the sea, of the braziers, of the great stars, of the unseen hordes of the yellow men.

Captain Doolan slept, but the three officers were on the bridge. They dozed in turns sitting in a corner. The air was too stifling and heavy with the threat of attack to allow them to seek their cabins. They waited wearily for the storm to break. The *compredors* had made themselves scarce, and all communication had been cut off between the few and the many. War had been declared without formalities.

From below rose the constant buzz and murmur of the pilgrims. The Malay at the wheel moved restlessly, and his eyes flickered in the binnacle glow.

"If only we had the crew on our side," said the mate, in an aside to the third.

They leaned looking out to where the bow thrust into the starry night as if it bored into velvet honeycomb. Queer smells and sounds assailed their senses, but stronger than all else was the suggestion of revolt. There was no peace in the night, but insistent mutterings and movement.

Yet nothing happened. They passed their fingers across their brows, and the moisture dropped on to the deck with heavy splashes. Their eyes ached. Their heads nodded. Presently the second took their places, and they slept lightly. The bell spoke at intervals. It struck eight clangs, and started out to tell the hours of another day. Yet nothing happened. Another Malay stood like a bronze statue at the wheel.

All three were awake when the engineer, grunting to himself and puffing at his short pipe, joined them. He was a hard old Scot, and his voice grated as if the salt had corroded it, and his soul was grim.

"Trouble, y'ken," he grunted as he

leaned against the chart room beside them. "Chong—he's m'second—wanna say nowt, foreby the engines are safe syne they savee o'er muckle tae smash them. So I'm letting the bairnies kick over, and I'm biding a while wi' you, syne it's rare sweaty down below when a mon dinna ken if y'fellows are alive or deid!"

"We're alive, chief—so far!" said the mate.

"Old Mon asleep?"

"Like a log!"

"Loony as they're made!"

Silence descended upon them, and they smoked and waited. The ship groaned along. It was the dark hour before dawn. The air was oppressive as if thunder wracked the sky, and yet there was no thunder. The skin grew parched and dead beneath the touch of the hot fingers of the air. Suddenly their straining ears detected the rustle of hurrying feet, mutterings and stirrings immediately beneath them.

"Here they come!" said the mate, and snapped on the lights he had rigged cunningly to command the ladders. Looking down on to the deck they saw the swarm of brown men sweep upward.

"Back!" the mate ordered. "Back!"

But the pilgrims paid no heed. They swept to the foot of the ladder, and even if those in front had not been mad with wrath they could not have halted, for a thousand behind thrust them on. A lithe figure ran nimbly up the rungs. The mate fired full in his face. He coughed, flung out his arms and legs, and fell back upon the heads of the throng. At the sharp report —— broke loose. But there were six upon the ladder now. Revolvers snapped and flashed. Men pitched headlong, but more came and more. They were also sweeping along the short boat-deck which gave on to the bridge, rushing on all sides like a sea breaking inboard, knives flashing and eyes mad. The quartermaster had vanished. The four men stood alone upon the bridge, and the bubbling stew of the *Anita* licked up to kill them.

While the eyelid flickered the threat had turned to an inferno of action. Murder was loose. The wings of death were spread above her. Behind the blazing lights the men crouched firing swiftly. There were screams and groans, and cries of hate and savagery in a dozen dialects. The ship had become an ant-hill disturbed.

With a roar like a bull the skipper burst from his cabin, which was abaft the bridge on the boat-deck. A brown shadow leaped at him with upraised kris. The mate fired and it crumpled up.

"Come for'ard, sir! Here!" the mate appealed.

But the skipper took no notice.

"To —— with all these —— haythen!" he yelled, and ran into the opposite direction, plunging in among the swarm, unarmed, fists whirling.

"Come on!" cried the mate in horror.

Having passed from the belt of light at the cabin door the vast pajama-clad figure had vanished. They ran after him, reckless of the consequences, impelled by the sailors' sense of duty to their master even when he was mad. They heard his yells and oaths and the thud of his blows. They tripped over bolts and stays and bodies. But before they had reached Captain Doolan they heard him yell, "Christian man—haythen!" high but chokingly, and when the engineer tripped over the skipper prostrate on the deck his seeking hands touched warm blood.

"I got him—quick!" he roared.

The others blazed over his head.

But the tide was receding from boat-deck and bridge as quickly as it had swept up. The news spread through the crowded ranks with amazing speed. They sucked back, uncertain and surprized at the suddenness of their success. The ship, still seething with noise, wandered on across the sea.

They dragged the heavy body back to the bridge. Their minds were numbed by the frenzy of action after the long suspense. They only knew they had a moment's respite. They wanted to see what was wrong with the Old Man.

There was nothing wrong with him now. One glance in the brightness of the lamps told that. There was no sickness of mind or body left in Captain Doolan, for he was dead with a kris through his heart.

"——!" they said, looking at him sprawled there with his pajamas stained and horrible, and his big body so powerless. "He's dead!" They told each other that quite seriously, knowing the fact well enough but shocked at this sudden termination of his bullying, savage existence.

"Maybe we got a chance now," the mate breathed. "Maybe they won't want us now!"

He stepped to the bridge. Ahead the dawn was breaking in a glow of pearl, faint and misty as yet but oozing through the ebony.

"Ah Loo!" he yelled in a great voice.

The turmoil quieted, and then the *compredor* hailed in answer—

"Yes, sir?"

"Ah Loo, Captain Doolan is dead. He who killed him must be punished. No harm shall come to the others, and all other matters will be as when we sailed. Tell them this, and let us know the answer!"

The moment his voice ceased, Ah Loo, heard with difficulty above the clamor, took up the address. The light grew.

"We'll be in a better position with the day," the mate said. "They must get us in the end, but we'll bag a few before the night comes again."

The engineer scraped his bristly jaw with the hot muzzle of his revolver. He didn't care much anyway. He'd guessed he'd end some fashion like this.

"The sea's a sair hard life!" he remarked thoughtfully.

The light waxed with the speedy growth of the tropics. Now they could see the seething mass below, still, apparently, undecided upon their course of action. Behind them the dead man lay. From bow to stern the ship rang with argument.

Presently the light was strong enough for them to make out Ah Loo standing upon the edge of the hatch and waving his arms for silence. When his voice could reach them he cried:

"It is too late, sir. We have done our best plenty, but they say suppose we stop along *tuans* they will make us pay for killing; they have killed of ours; there will not be peace any more. There are some much more wise, sir, but the angry ones are most and they want murder plenty quick, savee?"

They looked down upon the well-deck like speakers addressing an unruly meeting from a balcony. The day had come, making the carnage visible. The pilgrims had run amuck. They surged and leaped beneath the coppery, veiled dome of heaven. The heat and oppression continued intense.

"Who will sail the ship when we are dead?" asked the mate.

The *compredor* translated the question to the throng, and the group above waited in agony of suspense. While yet their fate hung in the balance they were startled by a fresh outburst which came from those who were gathered upon the forecastle-head. The figures there had been suddenly galvanized into activity. Some tumbled headlong down into the well-deck, while others stood aghast pointing out over the bow.

The men on the bridge looked out across the sea, and their brains reeled. Along the level, sick expanse a wall of water was charging down upon the ship. It shut out the horizon; it built a false horizon which traveled with it. Little waves ran before it in billowing folds, but above these the monster swept, towering majestically, supporting the sky on its broad shoulders.

For a second they stood aghast, and then the mate and the second had rushed to the wheel, and the engineer had crashed away to his post below. Nothing existed in the universe save that advancing mountain of the ocean. The natives broke into shrill wails, invoking the aid of Allah. Panic whipped through the ship. Wrath was drowned before that advancing wall of death.

Astounded and pale the trio marked its steady and stately approach. The old *Anita* seemed to gather speed and rush to meet it. Suddenly she was wheezing and reeling on the heralding swell. The screams of the pilgrims rose shrill. The men at the wheel drew hissing breath, and the third clung to the rail and stared out. They braced themselves for conflict. Before the bow the glassy, stained wall bulged up, smooth and round. It was gray, dirty and unnatural; the mind could not believe that there was any sea behind it.

The ship staggered up to it bravely. With a swish and a yelp the water broke heavily across the forecastle-head in an ugly cataract and swept aft, streaming on to the well-deck. Those who had not escaped in the panic rush were snatched up by the torrent and smashed hither and thither. It rushed over the lee rail, and slid on carrying many pilgrims to Allah ere ever their eyes saw Mecca.

The men on the bridge had no thought for these things. They watched the ship; they watched the Himalayan wave. For a breath it seemed that she must be swept down, shattered to pulp, driven into the lightless depths of the ocean. The smothered forecastle-head lifted, streaming. She staggered, seeking a grip on that smooth wall. She found her feet, she went forward, climbing slowly and clumsily like a fly upon the side of a jelly. The angle was incredible, and the moment had the fantastic, numbed horror of a nightmare. The *Anita* staggered and moaned—but she did not check.

Abruptly, there was no more water ahead, only bare and yellow sky. It was as if they had reached the edge of the world. For appreciable time they were poised so, the screw racing and wracking, and then she was sliding down again with horrible ease, swift as a toboggan—a toboggan of seven thousand tons with nigh three thousand souls aboard. Cold fingers clawed in stomachs, nausea sucked at hearts.

The wave had slid away, was charging across the ocean to smash in devastation upon unwarned isles a thousand miles away. The *Anita* slopped into the base of the next roller, groaned in agony of her old bones, found her strength again, flung off the crushing burden, and reeled on across the smaller switch-backs that the giant had shed. She was wracked, her decks were flooded, her scuppers poured, but she was still alive.

And there was no breath of breeze, but only the heaving, muddy sea sliding along beneath the sullen sky.

The second staggered from the wheel and was very sick. The third's head was bowed on his arms and his shoulders shook convulsively. But the mate held her head-on to the rollers, and his jaw hung down as if he were dead, and the sweat coursed down his face to his clothes. He was as a man who has seen the dead. He was wild-eyed and alternately hot and cold. He shuddered.

On the deck the pilgrims were staggering to their feet, but some did not rise for their limbs were broken, and all made bitter cries and prayed to the Prophet, beseeching his mercy. Here a man called his brother's name, but his brother had gone. There a son sought his father, who was with Allah. All was consternation and supplication, misery and repentance. The sea had smitten them, Allah had smitten them, they were humbled. They had slain and planned to slay, but the waters had engulfed their brothers and towered up as the mountains. They had beheld a dreadful wonder by the will of Allah.

The strange sea subsided. Reason crept back. The second wiped his white lips with a trembling hand, and the third raised his head.

"What was it?" their eyes asked, stunned by the suddenness of the vision.

"——," panted the mate, "I never saw the like of that before and I don't suppose I ever will. Something's happened down in the bed of the ocean—maybe a new island's been made somewhere—anyway, we struck a tidal wave. Volcanic upset, see? Lord, how uncanny!"

He steadied himself with an effort as Ah Loo staggered on to the bridge, dripping wet and his face contorted with apprehension. His supplicating hands went out to the mate.

"*Tuan*, *tuan*," he cried, "it is enough, plenty too much. All troubles go. They know that Allah has spoken, that Allah has frowned at that they did. They make their prayers to Allah, and to you!"

He salaamed, and the mate's wits returned. Out of the wave of death he saw life born for them.

"Ah Loo," he said gravely and evenly, "I asked you who would sail the ship if we were dead. Allah stirred the sea like the very —— to teach you wisdom. You know his will. Obey! How many are dead?"

"Ai-e," mourned Ah Loo, "many, *tuan!*"

"We can do nothing, Ah Loo. Allah has punished them, savee. What of him who held the knife?"

"Allah struck him out of life!"

"It is well! Send up the bo'sun and quartermaster. Git!"

The *compredor* hurried away. The two Malays came and the mate gave them the course and left the wheel. As he did so the engineer rolled on to the bridge, whistling a smutty song through his teeth. He stared about him like one freshly awakened. The others blinked, also, and drew deep breaths. The sky was clearing.

The engineer sought details, and they told him what had passed.

"Mon, this is a rare guid wee ship," he commented, "but yon sea's a black ——. Don't be thinking yon sea's done us a bonny turn—ye ken she's saving us for a prime —— of a death!"

He could not believe the kindness of the mistress he had served through all the years. He looked for an evil motive—and yet his eyes were soft. He stretched his arms out to the sun which was forcing a way through the unhealthy sky.

"Well, we're well out of that one anyway," the mate said, lighting his pipe. "Better get the Old Man fixed, I suppose."

They went to the starboard side and looked out on to the boat-deck. But Captain Doolan had gone. They saw his blood on the plates; the thin trail led down to where the body had slid through the rails.

"He was brave as they're made," said the mate, sucking at his pipe and watching the processional waves, "but he couldn't get away with it after all. The sea's got no time for the weak—and he was weak up here!"

He tapped his brow.

They turned to the discussion of the marvel of the volcanic wave, and the *Anita* thrust on across the Indian Ocean for Jeddah that is Mecca's port, while the pilgrims prayed to Allah.

ADVENTURE

By Berton Braley

Adventure's fine to scheme about
And dream about
And yarn about;
It has a lot of glory in a story
Or a rhyme.
But facing it is something that
You will not give a darn about,
And when you come to strike it
You won't like it
At the time.

For in its actuality
Its quality
Is perilous
It sets your nerves a-quiver and you shiver
In your skin;
The fear of death is on you
And you cry in accents querulous,
"I wish I were a stranger
To the danger
I am in!"

Adventure's no experiment
In merriment.
When facing it
Your nerves are tensely tightened and you're frightened—
It is hell!
You'll get much pain and hardship
From adventure when you're chasing it;
Still, when you've known it fully
You've a bully
Tale to tell!

Greed

by J. D. Newsom

Author of "The Deserters," "Marty's Bones," etc.

"DEACON" had dropped so low that even the native stevedores along the Nouméa waterfront shunned him. He had dropped so low that he no longer cared who shunned him, and eked out a miserable existence doing odd jobs for the Japanese farmers whose toy-like fields checkered the Dombari Valley. When they had no need of his services he would shuffle down to the docks and squat in the shade of the customs building, where he dozed or looked without interest at the shipping at anchor on the emerald-green waters of the bay.

He didn't know how he had grounded in New Caledonia. Once he had been third-mate on the—what was her name?—the something or other out of San Francisco on the China run. The rot had set in at Hongkong. He had deserted, drifted, washing up here, washing up there in half a hundred ports; kicked and cuffed and cursed, wholly indifferent to his fate. His recollections were like patches of blue sky seen through hurrying cloud racks—no sooner sighted than gone. From Hongkong to Manila on a freighter, down to Penang in the fo'csle of a schooner, drifting always. Junk, sampan and canoe had carried him until at last, unaccountably, he had reached Nouméa and could sail no more.

The sun-parched hills girdling the town were as the gates of the earth. Behind them, he felt, lay oblivion; and the one dread in all his listless days was that he might be sent over the crest into the country beyond. So he stayed close to the shore line and submitted patiently to the taunts of the *douaniers*, who were mighty men in red and blue uniforms, and to the curses of the Kanakas who heaped upon him all their hatred of the whites.

Didier, the boatswain of the health officer's cutter, had a great deal of spare time on his hands and always found a few minutes each day to devote to Deacon. So many people were in a position to give him orders that he found it eased his mind if he could bully the silent, broken man.

One May morning when the air was sweet and clean after rain, he strolled down the length of the docks to exercise his wit at Deacon's expense. He found him sitting on a stack of cases and ordered him off with curt authority.

"Not one Kanaka could be found to handle those boxes after you have sat on them," he remarked. "Get off before I throw you off."

Without a word Deacon slid to the ground and settled himself with his back to the wall on a pile of coal sacks. Laborers, grinning widely, watched the performance; and their presence drove Didier to renewed efforts.

"And what do you mean by sitting on those sacks?" he demanded. "We don't bed down your breed on good stuff like that. Let me see you move."

Deacon, round-shouldered and shambling, at last found a space on the bare ground where he let himself fall, grunting resignedly, but Didier was not yet appeased. He prodded Deacon's hip with the toe of his boot as he inquired:

"Are they all like you where you come from? You *sale Americain,* you are not fit company for the Kanakas."

It may have been the cool of early morning, it may have been a last spark of pride that stirred Deacon's numbed brain. A gleam came into his eyes, his flaccid countenance was red.

"You say another word about Americans, Didier, and I'll—I'll——"

Didier laughed.

"You will lie there like a pig in its sty and swallow anything I have to say. That is what you will do."

Deacon was struggling to his feet, and there was a grimness about his mouth that stilled the guffaws of the Kanakas; but Didier, his hands in his coat pockets, went on cheerfully:

"Look at your ships that come in here to load chrome! Who ever saw such sights? I laugh at them, even the natives laugh! And you are afraid even to appeal to them——"

Deacon's fist caught him full in the mouth; and for a second he was so astonished that he stood motionless, gaping. Another blow grazed his cheek before he recovered and stepped briskly out of reach.

"I'll kill you," muttered Deacon. "I'll teach you to talk like that."

He staggered forward, but Didier pushed him back disgustedly with the palm of his hand.

"You struck me!" he exclaimed, amazed at the worm's awakening. "You are too dirty to touch, so we'll duck you in the sea. When you are clean I'll teach you manners before dragging you to the police station. You there," he hailed the laborers, "throw him off the wharf."

They complied willingly, but to Didier's surprize it took eight strong men to carry out his order. A delighted audience poured from the warehouses and sheds to witness the event, and a cheer went up when a splash told them that Deacon had reached the water.

"Now," said Didier, taking off his coat, "I am going to show that *vaurien* what it costs to strike me."

Even the harbor policeman chuckled when Deacon was brought back limp and bedraggled, and Didier, seizing him by the collar of his ragged shirt, slapped him across the face. His struggle against the Kanakas had wasted Deacon; but some latent force flaming up within him renewed his strength, and he threw himself at the man, caught him by the belt, tripped and threw him, and before the crowd could react he was kneeling on Didier's chest, pounding his face with both fists. Twenty pairs of hands dragged him off his prey; he rolled beneath the kicking feet. All in a minute he was a bloody thing worried by a vicious pack which knew no mercy.

"Finish him," yelled the mob. "*À l'eau l'Américain!*"

Shrill and piercing, Deacon's frightened yell carried from end to end of the wharf:

"Help! Ain't there one white man here? Help!"

"Coming," came the answer, ringing above the pack's loud clamor. "Coming!"

The last of Deacon's power ebbed out through a dozen cuts, and he fell again to the ground while the struggle seethed above him. In his ears still sang the promise of hope. Somebody who spoke his own tongue would get him away from these tearing hands.

A kick on the temple rolled him over on his face; he squirmed a little, protecting his head with both hands. He was dimly aware of heavy black boots swirling among bare black feet; of the cobbles reddened by his own blood, of patches of sunlight glinting down between the massed bodies above him; a tuft of grass between the stones was sticky to the touch as it brushed the back of his hand. Then he fainted.

When again he became conscious of his aching body he found himself sprawling across the thwarts of a dingey which was pulling away from the dock, followed by a shower of stones that rapped against the boat's sides and set the water splashing all about.

The pelting ceased; the shouts grew faint. Soon the dingey came to rest by the side of a schooner, and he was being hoisted over the railing. He had a confused impression of blue sky and tarred ropes, white decks and peering faces. He was in a narrow cabin, on a clean-sheeted bunk——

He was being washed and bandaged and fed. All danger apparently was passed, and by slow degrees the mists clouding his brain cleared away.

Beside him there sat a large, gaunt man, resting gnarled hands on his knees. His face was emaciated, harsh, still as that of a graven image, and the heavy lines running from the flare of the nostrils to the corners of the mouth accentuated the mournfulness of the whole countenance. His slate-gray eyes studied Deacon until the latter could stand it no longer.

"Who pulled me out of that mess, back there?" he asked thickly.

"Guess I did." The voice was as melancholy as the face. "Heard you call."

"All alone?" queried Deacon. "But that mob——"

"They're easy to handle." His rescuer shrugged his shoulders as if to dismiss the incident. "When they get het up they fight with their eyes closed. Just had to wade in and—well, use a little judgment. Usually—" he sighed dismally—"I try to keep out of the way of trouble, but— by the way, you're an American, aren't you?"

"Yes," admitted Deacon.

"Thought so. So'm I. Name of Martindale."

"Oh, lord!" groaned Deacon. "I saw you make port yesterday. When I caught sight of the old Stars and Stripes I felt—I haven't felt like that in a coon's age. Wanted to cheer, almost. I've been watching so many tricolors and union jacks and heaven knows what——"

"So you tried to get yourself lynched to show your enthusiasm. Don't be so excitable. I'm going to lose good business over this. Why didn't you come out and see me instead of starting a row?"

"Me, come out?" Deacon said weakly. "I'm—oh, I don't know—I'm not much good."

"Let's have it," sighed Martindale. "What's troubling you?"

"You're all sorts of a fool," he went on when Deacon had concluded his shamefaced recital. "Letting yourself go like that! You're not only disgracing yourself, you're disgracing us. Get me? A Frenchman or a Briton or a wop can run to seed as much as he likes; everybody says:

" 'Ah, but that's the exception. Look what those people did in the past, 'way back in Paleolithic times—there or thereabouts!' "

"With us it's different. We're just beginning to be known, and we're just beginning to find out what we're up against. Look at what we've done in Honolulu, look at the way we've handled the Philippines. Do we get credit for that? In Heaven, *per*haps. Down here people don't know, people don't care, people don't want to know. Every American who goes to the dogs in a foreign port makes every foreigner say:

" 'See that guy? Yes, and all Americans are like that when they get away from civilization'!"

He paused and looked dolefully at Deacon, then said abruptly:

"That's how I size it up. What are we going to do about it?"

"Don't know—I'm all shot to pieces."

"You are," admitted Martindale, "and you can't go ashore again, that's certain. You might as well stay here a while longer. I'm going back to pacify 'em. I'll think things over and let you know when I come back."

He returned at nightfall—unharmed.

"It's all right," he announced. "They've handed you over to me. But right here and now you've got to pull yourself together."

"If I could get home," mumbled Deacon, picking nervously at the coverlet, "I'd have a chance. I know I would. It's this climate——"

"What you need," Martindale answered placidly, "is some hard work. I'm not a charitable institution, and I'm not going to grubstake you until I know what you're worth. If I get you a job will you stick at it?"

"Soon's I can stand on my feet, anywhere but in Nouméa, I'm game."

"That's the spirit. Now look here. Day after tomorrow I'm going to Lufua on the east coast. Fellow called Carrière has a fair-sized plantation up there. He's not as young as he used to be and I might get him to take you on. What about it?"

"It's a deal. And say, you're the first man who has——"

"You can cut that out," Martindale said gloomily. "Wait and see how you like Lufua."

IN THE course of time Deacon, under the influence of clean clothes and regular meals, filled out and stood erect. The shifty look in his eyes vanished; and when they reached Lufua he went ashore, laughing at the prospect of settling down to work.

He was, in fact, rather relieved to escape from the immediate company of Martindale, whom he could not understand. The latter, after their first contact, had turned out to be reserved, self-repressed, silencing with abrupt words Deacon's every expression of gratitude. He excited in his companion a feeling of awe and admiration; he compelled a high regard for his efficiency, for he handled his schooner as if it were a battleship; but, as Deacon told himself, he was not likable. And Deacon, full of new hopes, wanted friends.

Lufua seen from the bay appeared far more picturesque than sun-scorched Nouméa. Beyond the wind-bent line of coconut-trees skirting the beach there was a broad, green plain. The hills, which on the other coast ran down to the sea, here had retreated far inland; distance softened their outlines and gave them a bluish tint which blended with that of the sky.

Waiting for them on the white sand stood Carrière, whose tempestuous greeting swept them along and did not abate until they reached his home and were settled at his food-laden table, eating what he contemptuously called a breakfast *de femme malade*.

Carrière was a Norman with a touch of the Viking about him. At fifty-three he was still a match physically for any man. His white hair and mustache, the latter yellow with nicotine, set off his brick-red face, which showed not a line nor a wrinkle except for tiny patterns at the corners of his blue eyes due to too much laughter. His girth was ample; his shoulders had fallen away slightly; but he retained an astonishing speed and springiness on his feet. When he spoke he roared, when he roared he bellowed. Withal, a simple, kindly man, unsophisticated, hospitable, always cheerful, with a trace of cupidity in his nature implanted there by generations of thrifty peasant forebears.

He was immensely proud of his plantation, which he had wrenched from a wilderness of swamp and jungle. His dogged, stubborn determination had carried him along where others had given up in despair, and after twenty-eight years of unceasing labor he owned what was admittedly the most prosperous estate on the east coast of New Caledonia.

His home, a two-story dwelling built of stone, was squat, compact, narrow-windowed and thick-walled, not unlike the old strongholds of feudal days crumbling away today on the cliff-tops overlooking the gray seas of the English Channel. Behind the house stretched the coolie lines, orderly rows of barrack-like dwellings, where the laborers—black and yellow—lived cleanly if uncomfortable lives.

When the last of the Gargantuan meal had been despatched and the air was blue with smoke, said Martindale, leaning back in his chair:

"What about that two hundred and fifty francs you owe me, Carrière? I carried that machinery for you last April."

"You want to ruin me!" boomed Carrière. "Two hundred *and* fifty francs! I haven't as many sous. I want six months' credit. I always get at least six month's credit—don't you know that yet?"

"You might be dead next September," Martindale suggested mournfully, "and I'll be in the Hebrides at that time."

"Oh, I know you," retorted Carrière. "You apostle of misery! Never have you so much as smiled, not even at my poverty. But I'll outlive you, yes, and even this friend of yours."

He smacked down his huge hand on the table in front of Deacon and bellowed gleefully:

"Don't you know I'll outlive you both? I'm too tough to die."

"If you won't pay your debts," rejoined Martindale, "at least do me a favor."

"A thousand, Martindale, a million."

"Deacon wants a job. You're going to give him one."

Words of dismay poured from Carrière's lips:

"No! Never! Ridiculous! Absurd! You joke!"

He waved his hands in the air as if to fend off the impossible idea.

"The place won't carry another man. I have had a bad year——"

He rumbled on for fully ten minutes while Martindale smoked peacefully, in no wise disturbed by the appeals to his good nature. But Deacon suddenly burst out:

"Well, that's settled then. I'm not begging. If you don't need help——"

Carrière, all at once speechless, gazed at him round-eyed with astonishment.

"Who said I didn't need help?" he demanded.

"You— I thought I understood——"

"Now that you've exercised your singing voice," cut in Martindale, "here's the proposition. I found Deacon in Nouméa. He'd been having what I'll call a protracted night out. He's had enough of it and wants to go straight. That'll have to do as a reference. I think you can help him. Take him on. I'll be back this way in July. If Deacon suits you and you suit him pay him his wages——"

"*La débâcle!*" moaned Carrière.

"And I'll cancel my bill."

"Now I comprehend!"

Carrière's fist again made the table rock.

"You hear?"

He shouted in Deacon's face.

"I am an old man, finished, used up. You'll be my right hand. Cactus is overrunning the land up Miendu way where I want to plant sugar cane. It's a pest. You must take thirty men tomorrow, first thing in the morning——"

And so it was eventually settled. Deacon watched Martindale's schooner weigh anchor just before dusk that evening and with a sigh of relief went back through the deepening shadows toward his new home.

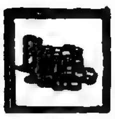
One last time before parting he had tried to thank Martindale, but the trader had cut him short with a gruff:

"Forget it. Carrière's a sound fellow. I'll turn up in a couple of months."

There the matter had ended; but Deacon felt frustrated, put to shame, because the man who had saved him refused to unbend. Self-abasement is sheer emotional waste unless one has an audience.

In the distance Carrière's bellow rolled out in the dusk:

"Will you hurry up, *nom d'une pipe!* Will you hurry? Supper is getting cold."

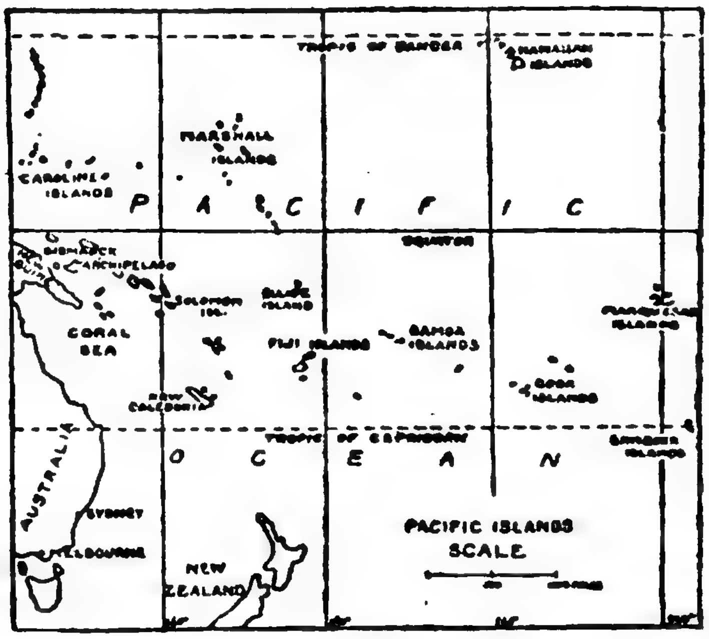


THE Nouméa branch of the House of Chabinasse stands at the corner of the rue de la Poste and the Square of the Coconut Trees. In size it ranks next to the infantry barracks and is far more imposing than Government House, which is nothing but a paint-flecked, rambling building hidden behind ugly brick walls.

The importance of the House of Chabinasse overshadows all Nouméa. It stands for Energetic Salesmanship, Up-to-Date Methods and Intensive Colonial Exploitation. It supplies New Caledonia and half a hundred other islands with the necessities of life and some luxuries—job lots bought up dirt cheap—such as phonographs and fireworks and rolled-gold cuff links.

Apart from its retail trade, which is not to be despised in point of volume, the House of Chabinasse takes a great interest in nickel mines, chrome workings, coal, meat-packing and, lastly, land.

The great Chabinasse is a Napoleonic figure whose very frown shakes ministries. He thinks in continents; his lieutenants administer nations. He sits in an office in far-away Marseilles, and never a penny falls but he notices it.



Wherever French is spoken there the House of Chabinasse has a foothold. From cold little St. Pierre off the Canadian coast all the way to the Martinique, from Dakar to the Marquesas, round and round the world stretch the interests of Chabinasse. The branch at Nouméa is a mere side-issue, a matter of little importance; but it provides employment for those it has undersold and ruined and should therefore be blessed forevermore.

It dislikes set-backs and interference with its private affairs and deals in summary fashion with upstarts bold enough to oppose it.

It was not surprizing, therefore, that a great flutter of stupefaction swept through the managerial office at Nouméa, a flutter which the deep-sea cables bore *diminuendo* to Marseilles, when it was discovered that an obscure planter by the name of Carrière had refused the sum of one hundred fifty thousand francs for his estate. Not only had he rejected the offer but he had chased the unfortunate buyer into the sea, where the latter on bended knees had had to beg forgiveness.

And yet the possession of that insignificant spot was essential to the peace of mind of the august and mighty. To north and south of Carrière's estate the House of Chabinasse owned many acres of good rich soil, but it wanted to run its mechanical plows and its tractors from end to end of Lufua Valley, where in the course of time it would erect a pineapple cannery which would compete with the output of Hawaii for the trade of the fruit-eating world.

"Annihilate this man," ordered Marseilles.

"He can not be annihilated," wailed Nouméa. "He is independent. He has no liabilities. He trades with Australia and buys nothing from us.'"

"Every man has his price," clicked Marseilles. "Buy him out within six weeks or resign."

So it came about that Vidal was recalled from Nepuaru, where he had been cornering nickel, and was ushered one day in June into the bare, business-like office of his immediate chief.

"You know Carrière," said the director, who always spared himself as many words as possible—at noon Nouméa is an oven. "Take first boat. *Emu* leaves tomorrow. Lufua is worth—" he pawed his way through a great loose-leaf ledger—"two hundred fifteen thousand francs. Close at two hundred thousand. Don't come back without reaching an understanding. Quite clear? Good."

Vidal never blinked. He turned on his heel and marched to the door where his superior's voice halted him.

"And, oh, Vidal. Turn out Carrière and—er—you can have that transfer. Algiers. I'll recommend you. Understood? Good. If you fail—resign."

Thus it has always been among the Olympians; they shift the responsibility higher up and the blame lower down, and Vidal ranked much, much lower than the director.

Raymond Vidal was an energetic young man of thirty-four who dressed so nearly like a fashionable Palm Beacher as to be unmistakably Parisian. His clothes never showed a crease except the quite proper ones; and his canvas shoes, reinforced with brown leather arabasques, were the very *dernier cri* of New York by way of Sydney. His ties were delicate symphonies blending with the color of his silk handkerchiefs and socks to form one harmonious whole.

He was built along athletic lines and ten years earlier might have made a nimble hurdler, had the thought ever entered his head. But the possession of lean muscles was in his case fortuitous; given slightly different secretions in his glands and he would have died young of fatty degeneration of the heart.

His brown hair was inclined to wave, but pomades subdued it. His thin, arched nose gave character and force to his face, which was further enhanced by a firm chin and a bushy little mustache which did not quite reach the corners of his mouth.

Once on board the *Emu* his habitual calm somewhat deserted him, and he restlessly paced the narrow decks, much to the annoyance of his fellow-passengers, mostly Mariste missionaries who wanted peace and a place to stretch their cassock-encumbered legs what time they battled with their breviaries, whose leaves fluttered in a diabolical breeze.

The Carrière affair was all in the day's work and bothered Vidal not at all; he relied on his audacity, his acumen, his aplomb to settle *that* thing; but he had other troubles of a very private nature.

He had debts. At the club where they indulged in *chemin de fer* and baccarat he had had to give promissory notes; at Nepuaru he had tried his hand at "*le pokair*" with the same disastrous results, and the worst of the nasty business was that his creditors were threatening him with exposure, not only of his gambling debts but of another and more confidential matter which also would involve a lady. This was truly annoying; for the House of Chabinasse demanded the most complete monasticism of its employees, at least outwardly. It had a Puritan abhorrence of the very breath of scandal.

Hence Vidal's terror of the future and his urgent demand for a transfer.

However, before the *Emu* reached Lufua his mind was nearly at rest; for he felt sure that he could handle Carrière and would then be entitled to the longed-for change of scene. He went ashore whistling between his teeth, as neat and debonair a business man as ever set foot on that beach.

Carrière was in the kitchen when he reached the house. He heard the old man's great voice shouting:

"Chicken again for *déjeuner!* I've had enough of it! Chicken—dirty, scabrous chicken, all yellow with unwholesome fat. What I want is a real *bouillabaisse* with real herbs in it——"

His thunder preceded him as he came stamping into the living-room—

"And I want a big red lobster."

He broke off abruptly at the sight of Vidal and glared at him, both hands on his wide hips, his head thrust forward, white mustache bristling.

"Where did you come from, young man?" he growled. "What's your business?"

Vidal explained his sudden appearance and tendered his card, which Carrière devoured at a glance.

"Again!" he roared. "Didn't I tell that other rascal that I would not listen——"

"May I smoke?" murmured Vidal, drawing a cigaret-case from his pocket. "Thank you. Now, *monsieur* was talking of a well-spiced *bouillabaisse*. I know of a place in Marseilles, not a minute's walk from the Prado, where——"

Carrière's lips twitched greedily.

"Where they serve it in deep blue dishes and the tender little red mullets are garnished with thyme. The smell! Ah, *monsieur*—a poem. And the price—so reasonable!"

"Sit down," grunted Carrière. "You seem to have some sense. That other fool could only chatter about the Peace Treaty."

All day they talked, during lunch, all through the long afternoon, while Vidal hinted at the joys of home and the comforts thereof. When a far-away look came into Carrière's eyes he sensed that the right moment had come to strike.

"You know," he said confidentially, "that first offer was ridiculous. When I heard of it I laughed. I could not help it. Of course I knew of Lufua, I knew its worth. I said:

" 'You cannot hoodwink that man. You will have to pay him what he asks.'

"And now that I find you wanting to go back to France—Normandy in June, *monsieur;* so beautiful!—I will lay my proposition before you, boldly, like an honest man."

"You make me dizzy," groaned Carrière. "Get it over."

"Two hundred thousand."

"Cash?"

"Check on the Banque de l'Indo-Chine when the deeds are transferred."

"Checks!" shouted Carrière, roused again to fever pitch. "Not for me. Do you take me for a *crétin*? Checks! I had an account with the Roussier Bank twelve years ago. Where is that bank now? And my good money! For two hundred thousand francs I will sell, but for cash and only for cash, here in this very room."

"But the deeds——"

"That is nothing to me. I'm old-fashioned. Bring up your lawyers, bring the money too. Then I shall be ready to deal with you."

"It could be done," murmured Vidal; "but are you quite sure? Such a large sum! It would be safer to come to Nouméa."

"I trust no one," declared Carrière. "I want to see the money right here—and count it—before I sign a thing. *Then*—" he held up an impressive forefinger—"you can have Lufua at once."

Vidal leaned forward, speaking quickly.

"All right; I see what you mean. But the *Emu* has gone north. Won't be back for another three weeks. I must leave for Nouméa immediately—tonight if possible."

"You're in a tremendous hurry," commented Carrière.

"I am," retorted Vidal, grinning as he stole the old man's thunder. "I don't trust anybody either."

"Huh!" grunted Carrière. "When you've lived as long as I have— But listen, I admit I'm sick and tired of this island. You've made me want to go home. Take my launch; Deacon can go with you. You'll have to stop at Thiot for *pétrole*. Three days each way—you'll be back in a week; that'll be the third of July."

"Perfect," agreed Vidal, jumping to his feet. "I'll go this minute. Where's this man—Deacon, you said, didn't you?"

"Yes; new overseer."

Carrière went to the door, where he bawled a summons through the gathering twilight.

A few minutes later Deacon entered the room, and Carrière threw orders at him:

"Drop everything. Get dressed. Take this gentleman to Nouméa. Wait for him. Bring him back. Rush!"

During the hurried preparations for departure Vidal remained quiet and watchful. There was something tantalizingly familiar about this Deacon—the name, the face, the voice; but Vidal could not place him. Moreover, quite a new set of ideas had sprung into his mind, and he was trying to sort them out.

Once at sea his interest in his companion revived.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere?" he inquired pleasantly. "Nouméa perhaps?"

"Possibly."

Deacon seemed disinclined to talk.

"You are not English. May I hazard an opinion: Australian, no doubt?"

"No—American."

"Ah, of course," murmured Vidal.

For a long time there was silence while the launch rose and fell to the long inshore rollers.

But Vidal had brought to light the information he wanted, and it fitted in admirably with those novel ideas now busy within his brain.

Lazily he inquired—

"Quite a change for you, Deacon, after Nouméa?"

"What do you mean?"

"I seem to remember a loafer who one day on the waterfront——"

"That's behind me; just drop it," advised Deacon, his jaws setting tight. "I don't need any reminders of those days."

"But some people are taking a great interest in your whereabouts. Didier—you recall Didier—is suffering from concussion due to a fall. I have heard it rumored that if the beach-comber ever returns or is caught; in fact I saw something about it in the paper——"

Deacon swore softly beneath his breath.

"And you are heading straight for prison this way," laughed Vidal. "But I won't help them find you. Why should I? You are doing good work now."

"You're a white man," sighed Deacon.

"By the by," murmured Vidal, drawing his companion out of earshot of the Kanaka helmsman, "Carrière is a tight-fisted old fellow. Do you mind telling me what you earn?"

"One hundred and fifty francs a month and board," answered Deacon grumpily. "It doesn't go very far."

"No, I suppose not," drawled Vidal. "One hundred and fifty—and perhaps you've not heard. He's selling out."

"That leaves me stranded again!"

"And with your—pardon me—your reputation you'll find it hard to get another job. Even if you went on at the present rate you'd be stranded in New Caledonia for the rest of your days."

Deacon shrugged his shoulders impatiently. He had no intention of spending a lifetime on that island. If only something would turn up, some opportunity—he didn't quite know what——

Also he was growing tired of Carrière. For nearly two months he had labored and sweated, gone to bed with every muscle aching only to be dragged out again before dawn to hound gangs of black men day after day under a blazing sun. All this for less than thirty dollars a month! He found himself despising the burly Carrière, hating Martindale, that morose trader who had forced him to work—for patriotic motives.

Quite suddenly he found himself overcome with a great desire to be home again, to mingle with his own kind, no longer to have to twist his tongue to pronounce alien words. He felt that his employer was cheating him, and although he did not admit the truth even to himself he was jealous—Carrière, without education, without manners, Carrière the peasant-farmer, was going to get two hundred thousand francs and he, Deacon, would be stranded on the beach, a pauper.

Vidal with patient cunning played his cards one by one. In the cramped quarters of the launch he matured his plans and worked upon Deacon, molding him as a potter molds clay. Only when they had left astern the Mont Doré and the white houses of Nouméa came into sight low down on the coast-line did he make a definite offer.

"We could disappear with the money," he said, "but that is too dangerous. We must not be suspected. The thing to do is to hand it over to Carrière, have all the papers signed and in order and then put him out of the way."

"And be held for murder—not much."

"Let me explain. You can manage the laborers. I'm told Carrière keeps his people short of money; he's had trouble before. A hint, a word in the right place, and they would sack and pillage. They have no great love for Carrière. The house goes up in flames. Of course you would have to disappear. I would blame the coolies."

"What about this lawyer?" asked Deacon, wavering.

"He," said Vidal, bending down to crush out the butt of a cigaret, "would also have to be disposed of."

"I see," murmured Deacon. "Yes, I see. And then I could——"

"Do anything you liked. Money is a miracle-worker."

The launch came to rest by the side of the concrete pier, and Vidal hurried ashore at exactly nine o'clock. His interview with the director of the House of Chabinasse lasted exactly forty-seven minutes; then the conveyancing lawyer, one Edouard Jobart, was called into consultation for a further period of nineteen minutes.

Jobart was a thin, middle-aged man with long, thin hands and big feet which he perpetually stumbled over. He was growing bald, and to hide this affliction kept his few remaining hairs clipped close to his head.

During the interview he kept his lips screwed up, whistling inaudibly, and said absolutely nothing.

Was he ready to leave for Lufua on the minute? He nodded affirmatively.

Could the necessary documents be drawn up there, and would the transaction be legal? He nodded.

Would he go to the bank with Vidal and draw the money, and did he own a revolver? Again he nodded.

Vidal watched him out of the corner of his eye and pondered. He knew that Jobart was not overburdened with business, yet Jobart lived in a pretentious house where he kept very much to himself. Moreover, there were stories in circulation throughout Nouméa as to Jobart's suspected sources of revenue—quite plausible stories, which if really true were damaging to the prestige of the great Chabinasse himself, who it was whispered paid vast sums to the lawyer to help him forget certain incidents connected with the financing of a railroad across sandiest Africa.

After the money had been paid over to them at the bank and was packed in a small, inconspicuous black handbag, instead of going directly to the docks where Deacon lay hiding in the launch's engine-room, they spent another hour closeted in Jobart's study. Vidal did most of the talking, but when he had finished Jobart shook hands with him and murmured in a thin, tired voice:

"I understand; oh, yes, I understand. You suggest possibilities. Shall we go now? I have a case a week from tomorrow before the Assizes, so——"

At twelve-thirty that day the launch swept out of Nouméa harbor, and Jobart, sitting in the small cabin to avoid drafts, said to Deacon:

"Excitement gives me a headache. You will see that the man at the wheel is careful, won't you?"

Then he went to sleep and left his companions to the contemplation of the panorama of gaunt hills streaming monotonously by.

* * *

CARRIÈRE stood in the doorway of his bedroom, a pile of shirts under his left arm, a pair of gum boots in his right hand. He was packing. He was hot. Sweat gathering on his forehead ran in rivulets down his flaming cheeks and shiny nose and cascaded onto his already soaking singlet. Behind him two house boys bent over open trunks, repairing the ravages of their master's frenzied efforts.

In the middle of the living-room stood Martindale, his arms folded behind his back, his head cocked on one side, looking like a mourner at a funeral except for a twinkle in the depths of his slate-gray eyes.

"Say something!" bellowed Carrière. "Come sneaking in like this! Didn't expect you for another two weeks. Say something: don't stand there like an owl."

"Well," sighed Martindale, "it's warm."

"Haven't noticed it," declared Carrière, "and I'm going home, so I don't care if it boils."

"I thought as much. What about my two hundred and fifty francs?"

Carrière's cheeks swelled up like toy balloons, seemed on the point of bursting; then his mouth opened and the explosion shook the room.

"That's why you've come back, is it? *Eh bien*, I have not a penny for you or any one else. But you wait; Vidal will be back tonight or tomorrow; then I'll think it over."

"Begin at the beginning," suggested Martindale. "At present you're incoherent."

Carrière flung the shirts and boots at his coolies' heads, found himself a chair and dragged it up to the table; but instead of sitting down he became so engrossed in his story that he caught the unoffending piece of furniture by the back and thumped it up and down to emphasize each point.

"Deacon is with Vidal," summed up Martindale. "They're coming back with two hundred thousand francs in cash; then you're going home. I'm going to stay right here until I see you on board the *Emu;* in fact I'll travel with you."

Carrière was deeply touched by this solicitude.

"Ah, Martindale," he boomed, "always I have liked you. I shall be sorry not to see you any more."

"It's not that," said Martindale. "It's my two fifty—mostly. But see here, I've got a cargo of bananas for Sydney. It can't wait. I'll send the schooner on ahead. If you'll put me up I'll travel with you as far as Australia."

"Of course I could pay you now," grinned Carrière, pointing toward a heavy safe standing squat and black in a corner of the room; "but I'm going to keep you. You are the one man I have been able to fight with all these years without losing my temper. I shall miss you."

They went together to the beach where Martindale gave orders to his mate; and only when the schooner was again under weigh did Martindale ask—

"How's Deacon been shaping?"

"Oh, good, good," Carrière answered. "He has a gift—knows how to handle black men. They work for him, why, better than they do for me."

"Sober?"

"Fair. I made him work hard, that young one. He had no time to drink."

"He's going to be on the beach when you leave—won't have saved much money. Guess I can give him a job on board the schooner."

"You have no love but for that boat," retorted Carrière. "I have watched Deacon. He is eating his heart out to see America again, and—" he roared confidentially in Martindale's ear—"he is going to do so!"

"He might work his passage——"

"No. I shall send him home—first class, on his feet once again. But—" he shook his fist warningly—"you must say nothing. Not until the very last morning when I leave Lufua for good shall I say—

"'Deacon, you worked hard for the old miser; now the old miser is going to help you.'

"Then we shall see what he is made of, eh?"

"It's rash," answered Martindale. "The whole thing is rash; but have it your own way."

The launch reached Lufua early the next morning, and Carrière, who had not slept, rushed down to greet the three men as they came ashore. Business, it was decided, should be dealt with at once; for the *Emu* was due within forty-eight hours and Jobart was in a great hurry to return to Nouméa. Also, explained Vidal, telegrams had been sent to the manager of the Pwingio plantation—which belonged to the House of Chabinasse—and an agent would arrive by that very boat to take over the management of Lufua.

Not by the flutter of an eyelid did Vidal betray his annoyance at the sight of Martindale; but that evening, strolling behind the bank of rhododendron bushes which separated the house from the coolie lines, he talked in a whisper to Deacon.

He would, he said, deal with Jobart and Martindale. Deacon for his part was to get the money, which Carrière had declared he would use as a pillow. Furthermore, Deacon must by some means cause the coolies to attack and burn down the house. Deacon's shot would be the signal for the uprising; then while the laborers plundered the place they would divide the loot. Vidal would hide until the *Emu* arrived, and Deacon must make his way to Thiot, where he could ship on some freighter to Australia.

The following afternoon, while Carrière and his guests sweltered in the living-room, reading and signing documents, Deacon went among the laborers at their work, and a tremor of ill-disguised anger grew up behind him.

Carrière was going away, he told them. For three weeks or more they had received no pay—let them beware lest they get nothing at all. He, Deacon, was their friend. He had pleaded their case, but had met with no success. He would try once more that night; if he failed he would fire one shot—let them stand ready to take revenge. He would see that Carrière was defenseless. Then they must escape to the hills and hide in their villages, for the *gendarmes* were sure to come.

"And they will track us down," retorted one surly Kanaka. "It is better to go without money——"

"It is all arranged," Deacon said quickly. "The blame shall rest on the yellow men who work about the house."

"True," agreed the Kanaka. "Thou hast thought of everything."

"That is my lot; for I have worked with you, and know your worth."

Dinner that night was a queer affair.

Carrière, sitting at the head of the table nursing the bag, noticed nothing unusual. The blast of his voice filled the room; and Vidal, cool and at ease, laughed lazily as he told stories of his work. But Deacon fidgeted, dry-mouthed, for whenever he glanced up from his plate he found Martindale watching him, studying him. Jobart pecked at his food, sipped at his wine and sat silent, spineless in his chair, his lips pursed in a noiseless whistle.

The still, breathless night seemed to creep in at the open windows and strangle with heavy fingers even Carrière's great voice.

At last the meal was over, the last pipe smoked. Vidal yawned, tapping his lips with well-kept finger-tips.

"Bed!" he sighed. "I'm still cramped after six days in that launch. Tomorrow the *Emu* will be here, and you'll be starting for France. Congratulations, Carrière."

"I join in the felicitations," murmured Jobart, brushing his untidy waistcoat, all gray with cigar ash. "The journey may be long; but all paths," he sniffed, "lead to heaven—eventually. Good night."

After this prolonged speech he stumbled off to the room which he shared with Vidal, and the others dispersed, followed by Carrière's shout:

"Two hundred thousand francs beneath my head tonight, my boys. Two hundred thou——"

Then his door banged to, and silence fell as the lights one by one went out. A barefooted house-boy pattered down the hall bolting doors; a rat in the garret began to gnaw at a rafter; the moon, riding clear of the distant hills, filtered mist-like through the shuttered windows.

A little before one o'clock two shadows met in the hall.

"Jobart?" queried Deacon, little above a sigh.

Vidal nodded.

"All clear," he whispered. "Now get the money. I'll attend to Martindale. Here's the gun."

Deacon clutched at the revolver, which was wonderfully cool and smooth in his damp, burning hand. He crept toward Carrière's room, and at the slightest creak a crazy impulse to turn the gun against his own chest swept through him. He felt in a desperate hurry to fire and make a noise, to burst into the room, yelling, and murder the old man in hot blood, to grapple with him and in self-defense to shoot him through the heart.

Cautiously he fumbled with the knob and turned it, feeling all the while the taut muscles of his throat quiver and twitch in one long, sickening tremor. Sweat, pouring down the sides of his nose, ran into his eyes. His teeth closed on his indrawn upper lip, and the taste of blood filled his mouth.

An angular beam of moonlight fell across the end of the iron cot where the covers were raised by Carrière's feet. Deacon slid into the room—a grunt came from the bed; then he lost all idea of secrecy; a mad, red flame licked his brain, and he threw himself forward, screaming. Carrière was sitting up, open-mouthed. A stab of fire belched from Deacon's gun, and the old man collapsed awkwardly, falling sidewise, his arms dangling on the floor.

The bag was in Deacon's hand; he dashed from the room. Vidal came running toward him.

"Take care!" he shouted. "Martindale—not dead. Too quick. Here, give that to me; you'll need both hands if——"

He snatched the bag away from Deacon, and together they raced down the black corridor.

Outside in the darkness a cry had arisen. It swelled and grew; it began as a growl of defiance—in a second it was a roar of the mob unleashed, the mob that kills out of cowardice.

Deacon reached the front entrance first and pulled frantically at the bolts. He had no eyes for Vidal, who, a few paces behind, was halted by the door of his room. An arm shot out of the void, clutched at the bag and was gone.

A great, thundering bellow reached them from Carrière's room. Vidal sprang to Deacon's side as the last bolt shot back.

"He's still alive," murmured Deacon. "He's——"

"Get out," screamed Vidal. "There's Martindale!"

They fled, leaping off the veranda into some bushes just as the Kanakas poured from their quarters and swept up to the house.

The first headlong rush carried a dozen or more natives up to the open doorway, where they found themselves wedged tightly together as they struggled to get in. Behind them the tumult increased.

One man was thrust forward into the

black passage; another followed, and another. Then something struck them out of the darkness. Silent and methodical, unhurried yet with lightning speed, Martindale met the rush—and stopped it. His only weapon was a brass candle-stick, but its sweep cracked skulls. Two of his opponents died in their tracks; the third he picked up and threw bodily at the black mob in the entrance.

The attackers recoiled—the door was slammed against them, bolted and barred; and Martindale, picking his way over the bodies, went back to find Carrière.

The old man in a long flannel nightshirt, deaf to the pounding against the shuttered windows, was turning his bed upside down, scattering pillows and bed-clothes to the four corners of the room. His face was drenched in blood pouring from a ragged wound searing his forehead; but, pausing only to dig his knuckles into his eyes, he went on with his frantic search.

He caught sight of Martindale and bayed at him above the thunderous clamor:

"The money's gone. *Your* friend Deacon—tried to kill me—took the bag."

He broke down, wailing—

"My good money; oh, my good money!"

"My good life," retorted Martindale. "Listen to that row outside. Deacon's gone. So's Vidal. Vidal tried to rope me, but he was a bit slow. No use bothering about that now. We've got to stop those niggers."

"At once," boomed Carrière.

The house-servants in a frightened, huddled group crept into the room. They carried knives and sticks, but their hands shook.

"Look at them, will you?" sneered Carrière. "I'll teach that black rabble a lesson. Where's my gun; oh, where is my gun?"

Martindale found it for him beneath a pile of bedding; and soon, one at the back, the other at the front of the house, they were firing through the narrow slits in the iron shutters. From the garret windows the coolies, braving the flying stones, poured boiling water on the surging throng below.

The assailants broke, retreated, came on again, clawing and battering at the doors and windows. By the light of smoking torches they sought to pry open the shutters, and by the light of the torches Carrière and Martindale slew them.

There came a lull; Carrière rushed from room to room, madly hunting for his black bag.

"I have looked everywhere," he groaned when Martindale joined him in the living-room. "Everywhere—the place is empty."

"Sure it is," agreed Martindale. "Didn't I tell you? I saw Vidal and Deacon——"

"Where's that other fiend, that lawyer, Jobart?"

"Come to think of it, I don't know," admitted Martindale.

They peered into the room where Jobart had slept. It was deserted, wrecked, but they discovered a bulging shutter barely held in place by a cracked cross-piece.

"He's gone too," growled Carrière. "If ever I lay my hands on one of them——"

"Can we hold out for two days?" asked Martindale. "The *Emu* will be along——"

"No," bellowed Carrière. "I have exactly six rounds of ammunition. I am going to go out——"

"You'll do nothing of the sort. You are going to stay right here."

Martindale listened intently.

"They're very quiet all of a sudden," he added. "Let's go and have a look from up-stairs."

They peered cautiously from a window. The moonlit night was full of blue-black shadows, all vague and indistinct. The thatched roofs of the coolie lines were silvery, and the blank wall of a barn stood out in sharp relief. Beyond was darkness, thick as a velvet curtain.

"They are all around the house," whispered a terrified house-boy.

"Bah!" snorted Carrière.

"His eyes are better than ours," said Martindale. "Where are they?"

"There—in the shade of the bushes by the veranda—many of them. And behind the house, in the shadow of the stables, I saw many more."

"What the —— are they waiting for?" pondered Martindale.

"And see; there, by the edge of the barn—" breathed the coolie.

They strained their eyes. Yes, there were two—three men kneeling by the water-butts. A match flared; a face leaped out of the obscurity.

"Vidal!" yelled Carrière. "It's Vidal!"

Martindale dragged him down as a bullet crashed into the lintel and a volley of stones clattered against the walls.

"They are waiting to see the last of us!" bellowed Carrière. "The ghouls! The *canaille!*"

"Not if I know it, they're not going to see the last of us:"

"But you have no ammunition!"

"That's true—I'm all out. Look here; they're watching all the exits, are they?"

"Those fools? No. There's the kitchen door down in the basement to the south. They haven't even tried to force it."

"Faces the barn, doesn't it?"

"It does, but——"

"Then I'm going to fetch in Vidal or Deacon or Jobart, or all of them."

"*Tonèrre!* That is what I want to do. We shall both go."

"No; you're not coming; you're not quiet enough, and that wound is still bleeding. You keep watch up here. I'll crawl out——"

As he went through the kitchen, where great cockroaches wandered in search of food, he heard Carrière fire once, and the tumult broke out again more deafening than ever.

Meanwhile, over by the barn, crouching behind the water-butts, Vidal was cursing Deacon. Things were going badly, very badly indeed. For an hour, after each unsuccessful onslaught, Vidal had growled and muttered and fretted, keeping up a constant refrain:

"You missed him, you fool; you missed him. Now we must wait and make certain. We can't afford to clear out. Oh, you fool, you fool!"

"What about you?" snapped Deacon. "You didn't finish Martindale. He's dangerous, I tell you. I know him better than you do. All you managed to do was to kill Jobart."

As time passed and the house still stood foursquare and unbreached, squat, foreboding in the moonlight, a panic seized the Kanakas. Flat on his belly, one man wormed his way to Deacon's side and growled:

"We are beaten. You led us on. You told us the master would be dead. He lives! What can we do against such a man? It would be better to surrender and trust to his mercy."

"His mercy!"

"Did he not care for the sick? Did he not feed whole villages when crops failed?"

"You coward!" Deacon flung at the man. "You forget the months you went without wages, and the fines——"

But he knew that he himself was lying and his words lacked conviction.

"You led us on," repeated the native. "You must go to him and plead for us."

They wanted to send him to his death. They would force him to sacrifice his share of the loot! His hatred flickered up again.

"Burn them out," he ordered. "Pile wood before the door. Break open the storehouse; pour kerosene over the stack."

"And if this fails, will you——"

"It can not fail. Go, be quick. And that shutter is cracking—tell some men to force it open while you start the blaze."

"But there will be nothing for us if we burn——"

"Go!"

Before Vidal could speak the man was gone.

"Call him back," he burst out. "Call him back at once. Don't let them burn the place. They must not!"

"Why not? It was your idea."

"I know; but if they do——"

"Where's the money?" asked Deacon, suddenly suspicious.

"Safe."

"Safe—where?"

"Here," Vidal said quietly. "At my feet. See it? There's the bag."

Deacon bent down, groping in the darkness.

"Oh, no, you don't," came Vidal's voice. "Not so fast."

Lean fingers closed about Deacon's throat. He struggled; but the vice-like grip tightened, and his tongue dripped from his open mouth. His knees sagged; still the pressure tightened.

"You won't need so very much money," chuckled Vidal. "You——"

A shadow was moving across the open, not ten feet away. Vidal stared, straining his eyes to pierce the blurred half-light.

The shadow took shape, hardened—Martindale!

Not a second too soon Vidal released his hold on Deacon's throat and leaped back. His revolver was jammed in his coat pocket. He tugged frantically at it as he ran. By the time it was free Martindale had swooped down, caught up Deacon and was racing across the open, back toward the house.

Vidal's shots flew wide, but his yells brought a swarm of Kanakas rushing from the storehouse. One great fellow, swifter than his mates, threw himself at Martindale's knees and brought him crashing to the ground, not two yards from the house.

The kitchen door stood open and black. From it suddenly emerged Carrière, a monstrous, flapping figure in his flannel nightgown. He brought down the butt end of his rifle on the Kanaka's head, and the man's grip relaxed.

Martindale swiftly dragged his captive into the house, and Carrière made fast the door just as their pursuers flung themselves against the panel.

Deacon did not fully recover consciousness until he lay stretched on the long table in the living-room. His head ached intolerably; each beat of his heart sent fresh blood pounding with hammer-like force at his temples.

He heard Carrière shouting:

"Great work! Glad you caught that one. But you'll take Papa Carrière with you another time. He is— Did you find the money?"

"Nope. Vidal was strangling him when I found 'em. Great friends, aren't they?"

"I thought you'd done that," said Carrière.

Then he remembered the black bag and groaned:

"My good money! I'll never see it again!"

The natives were rolling logs across the wooden floor of the veranda, stacking them in front of the door, and a coolie, crying with fear, staggered into the room, shrieking:

"They try open shutter—one she break. Master, quick!"

"And I have only five cartridges!" fumed Carrière.

He snatched the cutlas from the coolie's hands and roared at him—

"Get up-stairs and pour boiling water on 'em—and oil—anything."

Then as the boy stood gaping and uncertain, he added wrathfully—

"Oh, come along, I'll show you—you've been doing it half the night, haven't you?"

Deacon's fogged brain was clearing. He did not want to be burned to death. He cried out:

"They are going to set fire to the house. Don't you hear——"

Carrière came back and glowered at him.

"You," he said brutally, "you must keep quiet until a judge tells you to speak. You sold our lives to Vidal and my house to those Kanakas. Be still."

He flung out of the room and could be heard all through the house bullying and scolding the coolies.

"What's he going to do with me?" stammered Deacon, coughing weakly.

"Do? Heaven alone knows," answered Martindale, walking slowly up and down the room as he filled his pipe. "We're nearly done for, but if we live you are going to Nouméa to be tried. I'll see to that—fair and square. If we've got to go under, I'll see to that too. Vidal got the money?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can't get out again, that's a cert. I wanted Vidal."

His voice was mournful.

"He crept into my room—and I was wide awake—and tried to rope me. I must be growing deaf. Jobart's gone too. Seen him?"

"Why, Vidal said he killed him—" began Deacon.

"Oh, I guess so. First come, first served. Queer house-party all right."

He talked on placidly and Deacon waited for some word or sign of reproach. None came. Unable to stand the strain, he exclaimed:

"Why don't you blame me, curse me as Carrière did? I'm a swine——"

"You know it all by heart," commented Martindale. "There is nothing else to add. You've helped rob that old fellow. You tried to kill him—and he was a white man if ever there was one."

"And I'm not."

"Judge for yourself. He was going to pay your fare back to 'Frisco. Keeping it as a surprize."

"He was?" mused Deacon. "He was! You're quite right; I'm not white. I'm not clean."

A sudden glint of determination came into his eyes.

"But," he went on, "I'll square this if it can be done. The niggers are sick of this—they're ready to drop it. Will you trust me out on to the veranda? They haven't fired the stuff yet."

"You can't stop 'em."

"Yes, I can. I put them up to it. If I tell them— Oh"—he broke off desperately—"just give me one minute out there. There's no time to waste."

The shouts outside were subsiding, and

Carrière, followed by a string of house-boys, came rushing back into the room as Martindale swung wide the door and Deacon strode through. A waist-high stack of logs and brush-wood confronted him. He scrambled to the top of it and shouted at the Kanakas:

"Listen to me: I have spoken for you. Carrière will pay you! Carrière will pay you all!"

The torches sweeping up the steps toward him paused uncertainly, and the upflung fists wavered.

Deacon glared at the natives and for a moment held them back. But he knew that something more was needed—that they might fear a trap. He felt only loathing for himself now, and he cried:

"I lied to you! Get back! I lied for my own ends, thinking nothing of your lives. Get back and catch that other one who was with me. He too is to blame."

Like an ebbing flood the natives swayed back, dimly perceiving that Deacon's words rang true. They were sick of the killing; they were ready to clutch at the first excuse to surrender.

Then from the shadows by the barn a single shot crashed out, and Deacon, carrying both hands to his face, tottered on his shaky platform and fell backward into Martindale's arms.

But Carrière had seen the spurt of flame, and his rifle was at his shoulder. He caught sight of a fleeting white figure outlined against the barn wall. He fired—the figure leaped into the air and crumpled up.

Without a thought for his own safety the old man dashed through the ranks of amazed laborers, scattering them to right and left. His very presence, his blood-smeared face, quelled their shouts. They gave way, and within half a minute he was back again, dragging Vidal's dead body behind him.

He seemed suddenly old and worn.

"It's gone," he said dully. "He was empty-handed. It has vanished—my good money!"

He let his burden fall unheeded to the ground.

An apologetic cough came from behind the group in the doorway, and they turned sharply to find Jobart coming down the passage, bearing at arm's length between thumb and forefinger the small black bag.

"You had it!" roared Carrière with renewed energy. "You——"

"Somebody," sniffed Jobart, readjusting his spectacles as he peered at the body, "somebody threw it at me. I had gone to the door—to lock it—when I heard that first shot.

"If this is the money-bag—" sniff—"will you be so kind as to *take* it, if you please. I have such a headache! I had to hide under the bed—" sniff—"only safe place I could find—and *drafty!*"

"You were under the bed all the time?" barked Carrière, nursing the bag.

"I was under the bed all the time," repeated Jobart, faintly mocking. "I am a coward physically—*physically*. But you don't know what I mean."

"I don't care what you mean!"

Carrière slapped him on the back, nearly knocking him over.

"But I never pretended to understand lawyers," he added.

On the floor Deacon lay dying. His jaws were shattered, but there was a question in his glazing eyes.

"All square," nodded Martindale, bending over him.

Still the question remained unanswered.

"All right," added Martindale, putting a clumsy hand on Deacon's coat sleeve. "You've made good, old son. They don't make better men—anywhere."

Jobart sniffed as he looked on.

"This is what happens when one leaves Nouméa," he declared. "Two deaths; and my head is splitting."

They buried Deacon and Vidal at early dawn, side by side, a little apart from the long grave where eight Kanakas were laid together.

THE manager of the House of Chabinasse has utterly neglected them. Today the mounds are weed-grown, and in dry weather the westerly trade winds scatter the loose earth that has turned to dust. Soon the graves will vanish and a plow will furrow the soil above the bodies of the dead.

Carrière is in France, living on a modest scale near Caen, where he grows cider apples. He sends an occasional post-card to Martindale, assuring him that life in Normandy is never dull "because of the orchard thieves.'

He has found a reliable bank which safeguards his money.

Human Contraband

A Complete Novelette by Thomson Burtis

Author of "Don't Swat a Flyer," "Haunted Skyways," etc.

A HALF-MILE in the air, Captain Kennard turned around in the cockpit of the big DeHaviland Bomber he was flying, to steal a look at the six D. H.'s which were following his own plane. As always, he was aware of a profound satisfaction, with which was mixed real admiration, for the perfection of his squadron's airmanship. Each ship twenty-five feet back of the one ahead, and the same distance to one side—and despite the fact that each roaring plane represented a ton and a half cleaving through the air at close to a hundred miles an hour, not a ship lost position.

The Texas sun was blazing down witheringly on a landscape principally composed of mesquite. But flyers of the border patrol were accustomed to that kind of terrane. In fact, the "C. O." of the most famous flight of the patrol never gave the ground a thought as he turned to his work again. For five minutes he flew ahead, as straight as a die. Then he craned his neck out the side of the cockpit to scrutinize the territory ahead. A mile or so in front of him he recognized the white-washed circles of the machine-gun target, surrounded by thick chaparral.

He moved the control stick from side to side, causing the ship to rock in a manner that would have nauseated a landsman. Then he shoved the throttle all the way ahead. The tachometer registered seventeen hundred revolutions a minute instead of fifteen, and his DeHaviland started to ease ahead of the following formation.

Back of the leader, flying Number One, "Tex" MacDowell gave his ship the gun, and moved in directly behind the "lead" ship. Then Jimmy Jennings, flying Number Two, followed suit, and the others in turn. In fifteen seconds the "V" had changed into a single file of ships.

The captain throttled to a thousand revolutions, half-closed the motor shutters, and nosed downward. In a shallow spiral the bellowing air-planes circled earthward, the white-washed circle on the ground in the center of their sweeping curves. At five hundred feet Kennard straightened out and flew northward. Not a ship had lost position—it was like a game of follow the leader in the air.

Half a mile north of the circle he banked around until he was flying due south again, pointed straight for the mark. He shoved the throttle on all the way, and the bomber leaped ahead. Three hundred yards back of the circle he closed the throttle sharply and nosed over. The shrill scream of the wires took the place of the motor's roar as the ship dropped downward in a steep dive.

Kennard, eyes narrowed behind the big goggles, nosed over a trifle more until the nose of his ship was pointed at the circle. Three hundred feet high now, and the DeHaviland was quivering under the strain of the terrific speed. With a quick, firm pressure he clamped the machine-gun control attached to the stick. The *rat-a-a-tat-tat* of the machine-guns mounted ahead of him volleyed through the whine of the tortured wires. In instant response a cloud of dust rose from the circle. The bullets had gone true.

Kennard released the gun-control, and bit by bit brought his ship out of that breathless dive. It had to be done gradually, unless one did not object to snapping off the wings of his ship. The air-speed needle dropped from a hundred and seventy miles an hour back to a mere hundred and forty. In a sweeping arc the ship came level, fifty feet above the tops of the gnarled mesquite. With a clattering roar the motor answered the spur of the throttle, and with the excess speed of the dive Kennard sent his ship zooming upward until its sudden slowing warned him that flying speed was about gone. He leveled off smoothly, and banked to the right.

As he did so MacDowell's ship was in the midst of its dive. The C. O. nodded approval as another cloud of dust burst from the circle.

One by one the ships streaked downward, shot, and zoomed. By the time Pete Miller, in the last one, had completed his burst the captain was drawing up for his second.

Six rounds apiece they shot before Kennard zoomed to call his flock together. One by one they caught him, and slid smoothly into position. He did not bother to get more altitude, but pointed straight southward to the air-drome. At five hundred feet they sped along, and in five minutes the tiny, sandy air-drome came in sight. McMullen, four miles away, seemed but a step from the flight headquarters.

Kennard rocked his ship again, and again the planes went into single file. He dropped downward, skimmed the fence on the northern edge of the field by less than a foot, and leveled off a foot above the ground. Came that split-second when the ship seemed to hover momentarily, and his hand dragged back on the stick. Tail-skid and wheels dropped to the hard-packed sand together for a three-point landing. With left rudder he swerved the ship to the left, toward the waiting mechanics on the line, in time to get out of MacDowell's way. The crew took the wings on either side and guided the idling ship into its proper niche on the line. By the time he had run his motor out of gas and climbed out of the cockpit every ship had landed.

The ground was like a furnace after the cool rush of the upper air. Heat waves danced and shimmered above the air-drome, and the corrugated iron hangars which flanked the eastern and western sides of the field were like great ovens. Kennard took off his helmet and fanned himself with it.

"Pretty nice shooting today, cap'n," remarked "Pop" Cravath, adjutant of the flight and the C. O.'s official back-seat man. When the precise Cravath granted that anything was good, it was good.

"Every burst hit in the circle," Cravath added. "I watched 'em all."

"Good ——! It was perfect!" grinned Kennard.

His face, battered and scarred by exactly twenty-three air-plane wrecks, formed into individualistic wrinkles when the well-known Kennard grin garnished it.

"Hello, there's a car in front of headquarters. Looks like Mayor Edwards'," remarked Cravath.

"That's who it is, plus Sheriff Bill Trowbridge," said MacDowell, who had just drifted up. "There they are on the porch."

The air-men waved toward the two huge figures which were decorating the porch of the recreation building, and slowly made their way across the field. The buildings and tents occupied by the flight were in a row on the southern end of the air-drome.

"Nice work, fellows," the C. O. complimented them as they walked along. "Dave, send some men out some time before Monday and see that the bomb range is O. K. Have dummy bombs on all ships after the afternoon patrol Monday. We haven't had bombing practice since——'

"A week ago today," grinned Jimmy Jennings, a good-looking youngster who was an ace on the official records. "Cap'n, I believe you're in favor of working!"

"Not to excess," chuckled Kennard. "Hi, sheriff! How're you, Mr. Edwards?"

These greetings were bellowed in a loud voice, but the answering hails made the captain's shout seem like a whisper.

"Rustle, flyers!" roared his honor the mayor of McMullen, waving a magazine. "That there story about Bill is out——"

"And as a result I'm gettin' out fur a while, anyway!" added Trowbridge. "Gentlemen, hush! That felluh laid it on with a shovel!"

The grinning flyers clustered around the delighted mayor to peer down on a full-page picture of the huge, grizzled old sheriff that stared up from the pages of the magazine. It was a perfect likeness of him and might have been taken as he sat there on the porch—flannel shirt, cowboy boots, tremendous sombrero and the two pearl-handled six-shooters which were known from one end of the border to the other.

The magazine was one which made a specialty of writing-up interesting and unusual people. Since the advent of the Army Air Service along the border, nearly three years before, and the location of a flight at McMullen, the sheriff and his inseparable companion of forty years, Mayor Edwards, had been almost *ex-officio* members of the squadron. A half-dozen times Trowbridge and the flight had cooperated in bagging criminals from the air, with great publicity resulting therefrom. As a result, the old-time border man who used air-planes in his work had appealed to an editor in New York so much that he had sent a writer all the way to Texas for an article.

Mayor Edwards read some of the choicest paragraphs aloud while the sheriff sat silently and looked sheepish. Tex MacDowell and "Sleepy" Spears, the two pilots who had been concerned in Trowbridge's aerial exploits, were mentioned frequently, and there was considerable space allotted to the hundred-odd young men who twice a day spanned the border from Gulf to Gulf.

Finally the mayor, his fat face red with mirth, threw the magazine down.

"Well, you 'picturesque incarnation of the Old West,' yuh won't never live this down!" he chuckled.

The sheriff inserted a diminutive brown cigaret beneath his flowing gray mustache, and gazed at his honor with twinkling eyes.

"I don't expect to—not soon, anyway. But fur once yuh're right, Sam. I'm gonna run an' let MacMullen calm down considerable before I give 'em a chance at me. I wouldn't put it past yuh tuh organize some meetin' or somethin', jest fur devilment. Bein' fat an' a mayor and learnin' to wash regular ain't changed yure unregenerate habits none whatever."

He turned to the captain, who, together with the dozen other khaki-clad, oil-grimed flyers had dropped to the floor and lay stretched out comfortably.

"I figured I might drop down to Laredo fur a few days an' mebbe see the bull-fight Sunday. Don't happen to be no ships goin' down thataway, does there? It's a tough trip this hot weather——"

A chorus of chuckles burst from the flyers. Of all recreation in heaven above or the earth beneath, flying was supreme in Trowbridge's mind. Several times a week, on an average, he appeared with some transparent excuse for taking a ride. On the other hand Mayor Sam could not have been inveigled into a plane with a derrick.

The captain straightened his face and replied:

"Nary ship going down there for the week's-end, sheriff. Sorry."

Trowbridge cocked an innocent eye at the ceiling and blew forth a cloud of smoke.

"Too bad," he rumbled. "It's figurin' to be quite a spectacle. This here Juan Larcia, from Spain, and José Silveta, the idol o' all Mexico, is competin', each killin' two bulls. None o' you kids wants to see it, eh?"

"Is that the best you can do?" inquired Kennard. "I haven't heard you mention business or anything yet—you're losing your imagination, sheriff."

"Ain't that enough?" bellowed Trowbridge belligerently. "I tell you I *got* to let this infernal magazine git read an' discussed an' the town settle down fur a few days or my life won't be safe! If that an' a bull-fight ain't enough excuse fur a bunch o' kids that ain't dry behind the ears yet tuh help out a pore old has-been I dunno what is!"

"Bill always has liked bull-fights ever since one o' the critters kept 'im from gettin' married," remarked the mayor. "When we was both punchin' cows fur the King outfit—this was before I was married—Bill was right sweet on 'Corny' Williams' daughter—Corny was foreman. Her name was Beulah. Me an' Beulah was out ridin' one day, me takin' her to put in a good word fur Bill, an' when we come by the south pasture on the way home we seen a most remarkable sight. Up a tree, it was. Underneath was a big old black bull King had. We had quite some trouble identifyin' what was up the tree, but it proved to be a rear view o' Bill, an' what that bull had done to him and 'is clothes was a shame. He wasn't no romantic sight. Beulah never could see Bill after that——"

"Speakin' as a bachelor, and grantin', fur the sake o' argument, that that there calamity was responsible fur me bein' a free and untamed rider of the range right up to an' includin' now, I don't see where I should have anything but the friendliest feelin's for a bull," stated Trowbridge. "Which if you ever seen Beulah a year or more after then, an' talked with 'er husband, you'll agree in. Well, goin' from the ridiculous to the sublime, how about chances o' flyin' down to Laredo, cap'n?"

"Somebody take the old four-flushin' matinée idol," exhorted the mayor. "He's got a repitation tuh keep up now, Bill has. He'll fly with a gun in each hand, from now on, and nothin' on the ground'll be safe."

Kennard hesitated momentarily.

"I never have seen a bull-fight, and I wouldn't mind taking it in——"

"That's talkin'!" spake the delighted sheriff.

It was finally decided that they take off the next morning—Saturday. Trowbridge was really sincere in his desire to give McMullen a couple of days to assimilate that magazine article before he was exposed to the ribald comments of some of the old-timers.

"Well, if yore goin' back with me climb aboard, you 'survivor of the olden, golden days of the gunman and the cowboy,' " said the mayor as he lifted his two hundred and fifty pounds off his chair.

Trowbridge and Edwards weighed about the same, but in contrast to the sheriff's six-feet-five the mayor was built close to the ground.

The two old war-horses eased themselves into the front seat of the limousine and the mayor started the motor.

"Be out first thing in the mornin', cap'n," the sheriff bellowed.

"I'll be ready," promised the captain.

"Don't forgit what an honor is bein' bestowed on yuh," chortled Edwards. "Yuh'll have 'the terror o' border badmen' with yuh and, quotin' again from the magazine, 'his life has been a series o' hand-to-hand struggles with law-breakers of every variety.' Be prepared fur an extraordinary junket, cap'n."

II

AT PRECISELY three o'clock Sunday afternoon the sheriff and the captain emerged from the stewing lobby of the Hamilton Hotel in Laredo. Captain Markham and Lieutenant Donald Goodhue, commanding officer and ordinary pilot, respectively, of the Laredo flight, accompanied them. They hailed a decrepit taxi and set sail for the bull-fight *via* the International Bridge and Nueva Laredo.

The sheriff was attired in a black suit, the trousers of which were pulled down over his boots instead of being tucked therein. A black sombrero of slightly smaller size had replaced the tremendous white Stetson he usually wore. The army men were all in civilian clothes.

They stopped at the various ports of call on the bridge, and satisfied several varieties of government officials that there was no reason why they should not visit Mexico for a few hours. Every single official, Mexican and American alike, greeted Trowbridge respectfully.

Nueva Laredo, hot, dirty and odoriferous, was a busy place despite the hour and the heat. The bull-fight had stimulated the populace, and in addition there were more than the usual number of thirsty Americans making their way from bar to bar. Narrow, rough, unpaved streets were lined with dark, fly-specked little saloons and shops, and lazy Mexicans drowsed against the walls. Automobiles shot out from side streets with dizzy speed and no discretion. In a moment the taxi emerged into a square, the center of which was garnished with small, drooping trees. An American bar with the big sign: "Filling-Station—the Coldest Beer in the World," attracted the quartet, who bade their jehu cease driving while they partook of refreshment.

This important item having been attended to with satisfactory results, they joined the stream of traffic which led to the bull-ring. Ramshackle frame houses and white adobe dwellings lined the street, which was rough and dusty. As they approached the big wooden bull-ring a swarm of urchins inundated the running-boards and even the hood of the car, begging the privilege of watching it. When the sheriff's bellowed Spanish made them acquainted with the fact that the car was a taxi they promptly fell off in a bunch, scrambled to their feet, and started full-tilt for the next vehicle.

"Drive to the shady entrance," Trowbridge instructed the driver.

The only distinction in bull-fight tickets is between the shady and sunny sides of the arena. The *hoi polloi* occupy the sunny side at two dollars each, while the upper crust recline on the shady side at twice the amount.

They entered the big, crude amphitheater, and climbed up the steps to take seats near the top. There were fully ten thousand people already seated, and more pouring in from every stairway. The sunny side, directly across the sandy ring, was a riot of color. The peons were arrayed in every color of the rainbow, and they chattered and laughed like children on a holiday. Never-ending conversations took place between widely separated onlookers who shouted to each other at the tops of their voices. The advent of an American in knickerbockers and golf stockings was the signal for a young riot and wild applause. The sun beat down with mid-afternoon strength, and the ring was literally baking.

There was a considerable percentage of Americans present, and it appeared that a majority of them were well acquainted with Trowbridge. He was hailed from all sides, and a half-dozen weather-beaten old-timers came over to shake hands.

The band, which had been playing outside the arena, took seats on the shady side and tuned up. Then they burst into "La Paloma," arousing a hundred different Mexicans to a pitch of enthusiasm which required their dancing. Suddenly the sheriff's deep voice rumbled forth.

"Well, if there ain't my old friend Manuel Vertiga!" he said. "See that spig four seats below us in the Palm Beach suit—between them felluhs in blue?"

The flyers looked as directed, and at that instant the man turned around and glanced upward. There was something furtive in his manner. Kennard got a glimpse of a long nose and thin, cruel mouth, shaded by a straw sombrero. Face and neck were so dark as to be almost black in contrast to the immaculate white shirt. He darted a single look at Trowbridge, and turned away quickly.

"I've been noticing him—he's looked up here several times," remarked Markham, raising his voice to be heard above the din of the band. "His name sounds familiar——"

The band retired on their laurels, and a storm of applause and cheering was their reward.

"It does to me, too," stated Goodhue, a slim, dark chap with a pair of sparkling black eyes. "—— if I can place it though——"

"Well, I dunno what particular section o' that spig's career has come to yore attention," said Trowbridge, tilting his hat farther down over his eyes, "but he's been everything from a captain in the Diaz army to one o' Villas *caballeros* an' likewise one o' Dave Fitzpatrick's chief smugglers before you flyers got old Dave. He ain't never been got dead to rights, either. He an' I have hooked up a couple o' times—at least I was tryin' and I got a pretty good idea it was him I was tryin' tuh get but nothin' happened. I ain't heard o' him fur a year."

Kennard lighted a cigaret while he strove to call up some vague recollection the sheriff's words had invoked.

"Seems to me you told me something about him, a long time ago—some trick he is supposed to have pulled——"

"Yuh mean when Lem Cutler was captured by them bandits," nodded the sheriff. "Our friend Vertiga and his three sons, accordin' to the dope we got from a spig the Rangers got right after that happened, was in that bunch, and old Manuel there was the leader. They got Cutler, and he was found later with his throat cut. This spig, just before the barrel was kicked out from underneath him, swore that Manuel sat on Lem's chest and after a few ribald remarks killed 'im. Since then young Jesus Vertiga was shot for killin' a man down Candelaria way. That's one o' Manuel's boys on the end there—see him in the sombrero?"

The identification was accurate, for the other four men in the party wore dark clothes and ordinary sailor straw hats. As the sheriff was talking two of the party turned and looked upward, dropping their eyes quickly when they found the old man's gaze resting on them.

"Them *hombres* ain't spigs—see that one next tuh old Manuel translatin' for 'em? They look like wops tuh me," said Trowbridge ruminatively.

"You're right, I believe," stated Markham, pulling at the small red mustache that adorned his full, freckled face. "Vertiga seems to be quite the center of interest in that gang. He's telling 'em all about it, apparently——"

"I wonder, now, what that old skunk is doin' sittin' in a four-dollar seat, entertainin' a bunch o' wops that can't speak no Spanish nor English," Trowbridge said, as though thinking aloud. "That one next tuh Manuel is translatin' as shore as I'm knee-high to a horn toad."

"What's bothering you, sheriff?" enquired Kennard. "Smell something in the wind?"

"Nothin' special, only when old Manuel is around I'm bound tuh keep my eye peeled."

For a moment or two he pulled on his flowing mustache thoughtfully. There was a stir as a gate in the high fence surrounding the ring was thrown open, but Trowbridge did not even notice it.

"That's where the *matadors* and their respective assistants enter," Markham was telling Kennard. "The band's getting ready now. In jest a minute——"

"Listen, cap'n," interrupted the sheriff suddenly. "Just fur fun, and because I got a little score to settle with Manuel, and because I'm right curious, I wonder if one o' you boys would do me a favor after this shindig is over. I'm right anxious tuh know where Manuel is stayin' here in Nueva Laredo, or what direction he goes in if he's leavin', and whether them wops is along. How about you keepin' track of him when he leaves here, and spottin' where he goes? I couldn't do it myself——"

"Don here understands Spanish," said Markham.

"I'd be tickled to death," grinned the flyer.

"Grab a taxi with an American driver and just see where the gang goes. I know —— well if they're strangers and in charge o' old Manuel there's somethin' up. Just in case it happens to end up on the other side o' the river, I'd enjoy bein' present. Hello! Here they come. There, cap'n, that little stocky runt in red is Larcia, and the tall one in yellow is Silveta."

To the martial strains of the sweating band the procession of bull-fighters and assistants marched dignifiedly across the arena. The onlookers went wild with enthusiasm. Vociferous cheers and waving hats greeted the disdainful, brightly clad heroes.

The two *matadors*—the stars who had reached the dizzy eminence of killing the bulls—led. Back of them were the *toreadors*, eight of them. Four *picadors* on bony old horses were in line behind the two files of *toreadors*. Bringing up the rear was a team of mules driven by a youth whose dignity was far more impressive than the demeanor of the *matadors* themselves. His exalted duty was to come later, and consisted in dragging the dead bulls from the arena.

The Mexican general commanding the garrison of the town received the obeisance of the *matadors* from his box. Then the *toreadors*, carrying their capes, scattered about the arena. Larcia, the squat Spaniard who was to kill the first bull, swaggered over to the fence and waited with a bored air. A door in the fence opened, and out rushed a huge black bull, two tiny darts swathed in ribbon sticking forth from his back. He charged the nearest cape, the *toreador* leaping aside gracefully as another one ran in front of the maddened beast, waving his cape. One by one the *toreadors* took their turn, leaping in as soon as the active cape-man showed signs of being followed too closely. Twice *toreadors* turned tail and ran like rabbits for the shelter of the small wooden boards, set close to the fence, behind which hard-pressed bull-fighters could retire in safety.

The delighted Mexicans applauded heartily, and laughed with delight when a *toreador* took shelter. Finally Larcia swaggered to the center of the ring with his cape. Working close to the fence and safety was beneath the dignity of a *matador*. He held his cape out invitingly, and as the bull charged avoided the nearest horn by a movement of his body. His feet remained motionless.

The Mexicans came to their feet *en masse*. Hats sailed into the ring, and the amphitheater was a riot of waving arms. Larcia waved and smiled, turning his back on the bull to do so, and thereby starting a hysterical ovation.

Again Larcia held out his cape. As the bull charged the *matador* stepped aside, dragging the cape over the bull's eyes, turning him for another charge. Then, planting himself firmly, he stood in one spot and made the bull charge by him twice without making him move anything but his body. The foundation of all bull-fighting lies in the fact that a bull closes his eyes on the charge. Nevertheless, it was skilful and daring work.

"What d'yuh think of it?" rumbled the sheriff to Kennard.

"That fellow is taking a sporting chance," nodded the captain. "I don't mind watching an unarmed man put himself against a bull out there in the center. Look at that!"

Larcia had taken his post next to the

fence, one leg against the bench which ran around it in order to give hard-pressed *toreadors* a foot-rest if forced to leap the fence. He held out his cape beside him, and three times in rapid succession the bull charged it, missing his tormentor by a fraction of an inch.

The enthusiasm that this maneuver brought forth was absolutely hysterical. Men shouted in frenzied delight and admiration. Pocketbooks sailed into the ring, and bedlam was let loose. The band tried to get in its share of the tribute, but the music was indistinguishable fifty yards away. Even the Americans joined decorously in the applause.

Captain Kennard nudged the sheriff.

"Your friend Vertiga is the only Mex in the place in his right mind," he yelled above the tumult.

Trowbridge squinted down at the famous renegade. The Italians and the younger Vertiga were on their feet, waving and yelling, but Vertiga was sitting quietly. His head turned slightly as he looked up at his cheering companions. A sardonic smile lifted the corners of his mouth. The dark face seemed more cruelly saturnine than ever.

"I don't like people to smile that way at me," remarked Markham.

"Looks like he should've licked his lips, don't he?" chuckled the sheriff. "I'm plumb wrought up about what Manuel's got on his mind."

Vertiga turned toward the ring again as the shouting died away. One of the *picadors* spurred his horse along the fence toward the bull. Captain Kennard's face set a trifle as he watched—he dreaded what was coming. He had heard of the disemboweled horses dragging themselves out of the ring.

But they were to be spared that. Perhaps in deference to the considerable volume of American patronage they enjoyed, the horses played but little part in the afternoon's events. A *picador* is supposed to halt the charging bull with his blunt-ended spear, but they seldom do. In this case the *picador* stopped the onrushing brute partially, and turned him aside so that one blunt horn barely scraped his blindfolded mount's flank, doing no damage. A *toreador* drew the bull away with flaunting cape instead of allowing the bull to make another charge at the horse.

"They do that here," nodded Trowbridge. "Which is why I'm here. Them *picadors* don't mean nothin', anyway. It just makes it a little bloodier, which is what these —— peons like. But it don't make much difference, even to them. There goes the bugle. Now let's see how good that squatty little runt is with his sword. He's supposed to kill the bull with one thrust, while said critter is chargin'."

Larcia did not match his final task any too well, however. His sword was handed him by an attendant outside the fence, and he swaggered to the center of the ring. *Toreadors* and *picadors* had left the arena. The huge beast stood in the center, breathing heavily but still pawing the ground. With lowered head he watched his tormentor approach, his cape draped over the sword. Twice the bull charged, to be avoided disdainfully. Then Larcia dispensed with the cape, and took up his position six or seven feet ahead of the bull, sword outthrust, measuring the thrust.

For a moment animal and man stood like statues—flooding sunlight flashing from the brilliant costume of the man and turning his sword into a thin line of light. Deathly silence fell over the audience. Then a shrill bark of excitement as the bull charged. As he leaped aside Larcia thrust downward through the shoulder—but the bull did not go down. He had not pricked the heart.

Larcia ran for another sword. Again the same procedure, but this time the bull dropped like a stone, and lay as motionless. Great and prolonged applause, which the disgusted Larcia acknowledged surlily.

Silveta was less of a grandstander with his bull, but he was as graceful as a snake. It was almost monotonous to watch him—Kennard felt that the tremendous bull had no chance. Silveta did not arouse the wild acclaim of the populace until he went to the fence, procured the three-cornered black velvet hat he had discarded, and approached within inches of the bull. Twice the bull charged. Then Silveta succeeded in touching one horn with his hand, and then in placing the cap on the beast's head.

It came near being his last fight, for the bull charged as the hat touched him, and one horn ripped a piece from the *matador's* trousers-leg. It took a full minute for the enthusiasm to subside. Silveta killed his bull with the first thrust, and had to make a circle of the whole arena while the bull was being dragged out, suitably to acknowledge the applause.

The baiting and killing of the next two bulls was but a repetition of what had taken place. The *matadors* performed so easily that the spectacle grew monotonous to Kennard. It was hard to realize that the slightest slip or mis-step out there meant a man gored to death. It seemed inevitable that the bull's charge be abortive. The only incident which temporarily thrilled him was a defeat of the tall, graceful Silveta.

When it came time to plunge the two long beribboned darts into his last victim's shoulder just before the sword work, Silveta brought a chair into the center of the arena, and sat down, holding the long darts ready in his hand. He sat motionless while the biggest bull of the afternoon charged, and literally slipped out from underneath the horns, sinking both darts home at the same time, one on each shoulder. The huge crowd went wild as the bull gored and tossed the chair.

Time after time the captain's eyes wandered to Vertiga, and to the voluble Italians who were apparently the Mexican's guests. The sardonic, thin-faced old man devoted a great deal of attention to them, explaining the finer points of the cape and sword work, and illustrating with many gestures each point he made. His son, a huge hulking young fellow with a deep scar on one cheek, devoted his exclusive attention to the fight.

Steady observation confirmed the fact that there was but one of the men who understood Vertiga, for he invariably translated to his fellows. The flyer wondered just what was in Trowbridge's mind. He must have some definite idea to go to the trouble of having Goodhue trail the party——

A shout of wild acclaim split the heavens as Silveta sent the last of the four bulls to earth with a lightning-like thrust that left the sword buried to the hilt.

"See you at the Hamilton as soon as I get 'em staked down, sheriff!" grinned Goodhue, and started slowly down the steps.

Vertiga and his party were already on their feet, moving toward the nearest exit.

"Might as well set still a minute an' let the mob get thin," said the sheriff, rolling himself a tiny brown-paper cigaret. "I shore hope young Goodhue don't lose them precious Vertigas."

"What's on your mind, sheriff?" queried Kennard. "Just because you spot a badman in Mexico doesn't explain to my feeble intellect why you should start in tracking him to his lair."

"And yore commandin' an outfit o' the border patrol!" returned Trowbridge, his puckered eyes twinkling beneath the heavy gray eyebrows. "Ain't you acquainted with up-to-date smugglin'?"

"Huh?"

"Since this three per cent. emigration law——"

Kennard snapped his cigaret down disgustedly.

"What a dumb-bell *I* am!"

"Me, too," grinned big Markham. "You think that's what Vertiga is up to—delivering those wops across the river?"

"It's a good chance," chuckled Trowbridge. "Item one: I know just as shore as though I could read his mind that Vertiga's up to somethin', the way he avoided my eye. He's always up to somethin', anyway. I nabbed him once when he was workin' for Dave, but o' course with Dave on the job nothin' could be pinned on him, and he got loose. But he didn't want to see me this afternoon, for some reason. Item two: them wops bein' with him ain't natural. He's cultivatin' 'em, and if he's cultivatin' he's plannin' to get somethin' out of 'em. The most likely thing is that he's contracted to deliver 'em safe an' sound and in defiance of the laws made an' provided, intuh the U. S. A.

"In a case like this, where they can't even speak English an' only one of 'em Spanish, the chances are that old Manuel is hired to get 'em intuh San Antone, say, or at least on a train bound there. And when Manuel steps on American territory with them *hombres*, if ever, I shore would take satisfaction in bein' a reception committee!"

"But you're a long way from Hidalgo County," suggested Kennard.

"Jim Trent and I won't quarrel none over jurisdiction, and in a case o' emergency a few legal quirks won't stop me none whatever," chuckled Trowbridge. "Let's mosey, boys."

Accordingly they moseyed. They selected a driver from the mob of imploring jehus who swamped them when they emerged from the ring, and in twenty minutes were deposited at the Hamilton

Hotel. Four times while *en route* through Nueva Laredo the three men united in prayer as cars wildly shot out of crooked sidestreets, but by a miracle collisions were avoided.

The sheriff, as usual, found that he was well acquainted with nearly half the occupants of the lobby, so the party found themselves holding a reception. Kennard and Markham listened, mostly, while weather-beaten border men swapped yarns and reminiscences with Trowbridge. Both flyers had been on the border long enough to be steeped in its traditions, and there was nothing bizarre to them in the casual yarns of the old-timers. Trowbridge's rumbling chuckle rolled forth continuously.

"He's sure holding an old home week, isn't he?" grinned Kennard.

"He and old man Edwards have been famous in this country for forty years," agreed Markham. "Ayers, of the Rangers, was telling me the other day that when Edwards and the sheriff there were with the Rangers years ago their reputation spread all over Texas, for that matter. By the way, do you know that it's been two hours since we've set eyes on Goodhue?"

Kennard glanced at his watch surprizedly.

"Right you are. Let's see if we've had a telephone call."

An inquiry at the desk brought a negative answer.

"Nothing doing," he told Markham, and the sheriff broke a sentence off in the middle to ask—

"Git a call from Goodhue?"

"No. It's been two hours, too——"

"Shore 'nough!" roared Trowbridge in complete surprize. "Hum."

He took a look at his huge turnip of a watch.

"Well, he must be gettin' considerable dope," he opined at length. "I guess Manuel ain't startin' off anywhere. Nothin' to do but wait, I guess."

Which they did, with increasing uneasiness. It had been nearly four hours since the end of the fight, and twilight had fallen like magic, when the clerk's voice resounded through the lobby.

"Captain Kennard or Mr. Trowbridge!"

"I'll take it," said Kennard, starting for the desk.

The clerk indicated the desk telephone.

"Captain Kennard speaking."

"This is Dr. Harvey speaking," said an unfamiliar voice. "I am at my office, 432 Soledad Street, Laredo. Lieutenant Donald Goodhue is here, pretty badly smashed up. I brought him over from Nueva Laredo in my car. He wants to see you at once!"

"How badly is he hurt?" snapped Kennard.

"Left leg badly mashed, fracture of the right forearm, and miscellaneous bruises. Run into by an automobile. He says to hurry!"

III

THEY found Goodhue, his face twisted in a wry grin, on a couch in the bearded Dr. Harvey's office.

"An automobile driven by a Mexican ran into him while he was crossing a street," stated Harvey. "He was knocked unconscious, and didn't come to until I worked over him in the American Bar. Some Americans brought him there and called me."

"And that car popped me off intentionally!" stated Goodhue.

"Before we go any further, is there anything—serious in his injuries?" asked Kennard.

The doctor shook his head.

"Just what I told you. Three or four weeks will fix him up."

"I'll call the ambulance from the field," said Markham, going to the telephone.

"Now what happened?" asked the captain.

Trowbridge, his shaggy eyebrows drawn together in a frown, pulled at his mustache. His eyes were like twin points of light as he waited silently for Goodhue to speak.

"Well, to begin at the beginning, they took a taxi and I took another one and they drove to a house on the outskirts of the town and went in, the whole bunch. I waited a block away. They dismissed the taxi and were in there about half an hour. I've got the location of the house all right. When they came out another big spig was with 'em—looked like it might be Vertiga's other son. Two old Fords had driven up in front, meanwhile. All those wops were dressed like spigs—no coat, handkerchiefs around their necks, and straw sombreros on. They each had bags that might have had their other clothes in.

"I still had my taxi, and followed 'em down to a little hole-in-the-wall saloon on the street that leads down to the bridge. They stopped there and went in, and three or four minutes later I went in too. The place was pretty full—a crowd of stinking *peons*, all drinking. I hung around and ordered a drink without being noticed, I think. I heard the wops give some toast and laugh, and then that bird that translates evidently translated it to Vertiga. There was something about San Antone in it."

"Drinking to a speedy arrival there, probably," grunted Kennard.

"That's what I thought. Vertiga and his sons didn't do much talking, but the wops were talking a streak—and getting a little drunk. I heard just two things—snatches—that I thought worth anything. Vertiga said something in a low-voiced conversation with one of his sons and mentioned Carana—isn't that a little settlement about fifty miles up toward Mc-Mullen, right on the river-bank?"

"By the powers!" bellowed the sheriff, slapping his thigh with his hat. "Go ahead, son!"

"Well, when I heard that —— this leg!"

The pilot's face went white with pain, and Dr. Harvey was beside him in an instant.

"Don't move a muscle!" he warned.

"You're right I won't!" grinned the irrepressible Goodhue. "Not if I can help it. Well, when I heard that I figured it was time to report. I'd been standing back of these bozos, and so I stuck my hand over to the bar to pay for my drink, and started for the door. I looked around, and found old Vertiga's eyes right on me, and he was whispering a blue streak to his sons. The wops were watching me with no friendly eyes, either. They hadn't noticed me before, but that minute they had me spotted as being with you, sheriff, and I guess they were wondering how much I knew.

"I didn't think much of it. I went out and started for the bridge, it was only about two hundred yards away. Like a —— fool, I didn't look back. You know where the road to the bridge turns and goes up that steep incline to the bridge? I got that far—you know there's no sidewalk there—and was walking along the side of the road. I heard a Ford coming like ——. I was already close to the side of the road, next to that railing they have. I happened to look around, and saw the flivver making right for me.

"It was all in a flash, you know, but I'll swear it was one of the Vertiga boys driving by himself. I was next to the rail, and couldn't get any farther. The only way to jump was toward the middle of the road. I got back as far as I could, but the car hit me—and that's all I remember. That is, until about a half-hour ago in the American bar with the doc here working on me."

"Carana only has one white family in it—Felluh named Dalton that runs the store, and he ain't got the back-bone of the average chipmunk," ruminated the sheriff. "The Vertigas are aimin' tuh get them *hombres* across the river to Carana, and then get 'em to San Antone either by train from Laredo here or McMullen, or mebbe go across country, ridin'. They may cross the river right at Carana, or else have horses planted somewhere to ride in there. It must be somethin' pretty big, or they wouldn't 'a' gone to all that trouble to knock you off, son."

He glanced out of the window—it was totally dark, and the moon was already riding high in the sky.

"Best I can do is get everybody primed to pick up Vertiga and his load," the old man said sadly. "They done what they set out tuh do in keepin' me off their trail. I shore would've loved to been up around Carana lookin' for 'em, but it's too late now."

Kennard walked to the window and leaned out. He looked at the sky briefly. The presence of the crippled Goodhue had changed the sturdy little captain's mental attitude completely. The whole incident had been more of a lark up to the time of that telephone call—as though the sheriff was on Vertiga's trail more for a joke than anything else. It had seemed wildly improbable, to say the least, that the accidental meeting of the old Mexican and one of his old foes should have any important consequences. Now it had changed into something definite—and there was nothing Kennard enjoyed, personally and officially, more than a prospect such as loomed ahead.

"They've had three and a half hours to get close to fifty miles over tough going, assuming that they took the trail on the Mexican side as far as Carana, which seems most probable," he said to the suddenly tense group of men. "It's bright moonlight, and I know this country like the palm of my hand. Likewise, I've landed once within two miles of Carana. What do you say to a moonlight jaunt, sheriff? We can be there in less than an hour, and if our ideas are correct we might pick 'em up and get details in Carana if we don't catch 'em crossing."

"Let's go!" boomed the delighted Trowbridge. "I'm stringin' with you on this flyin'—I didn't say nothin', knowin' how this night-flyin' is——"

"I'd give 'em a shot at my other leg to be along," sighed Goodhue soulfully.

"I'll have your ship warmed up—we can go out in the ambulance with Goodhue and it'll be ready when we get there," suggested the excited Captain Markham, leaping for the phone.

Dr. Harvey, who had been listening to the conversation with popping eyes, got busy likewise.

"You'll need an opiate to stand the trip, lieutenant. I'll give it to you now. Are you certain the surgeon is at the field? You'll need attention——"

"Here he is!"

Major Barker, flight surgeon of the Laredo flight, entered unceremoniously, followed by two soldiers and a stretcher.

"The ambulance is outside," he proclaimed. "What happened——"

He was told the story in brief sentences while Dr. Harvey administered the drug. In a moment the two physicians had transferred the invalid to the stretcher and he was being carried out.

"Your ship'll be rarin' to go," Markham told them as he hung up the receiver. "It's such a bright night I've decided to get out a couple more ships just for patrol purposes. You can't make this party too exclusive, you McMullenites. We'll watch the river for twenty miles on each side of the town."

"How much do we owe you, doc?" enquired Captain Kennard. "We appreciate your services——"

"Not a nickel," smiled Harvey. "Just do those fellows up brown, and we'll all be satisfied. One thing more—if you don't drop around and tell me about it, Markham, I'll send in a bill that'll keep the government squealing for months!"

IV

THE roar of warming motors reached their ears a quarter of a mile from the air-drome. As the ambulance turned into the reservation the three DeHavilands were shooting showers of sparks from six exhaust-pipes, and the Libertys were running wide-open on the final ground test. Busy crew men and curious flyers surrounded the ships. The big bombers, vague in the moonlight and breathing fire as they strained against the wheel-blocks, were like live things quivering with eagerness to be gone.

The ambulance stopped in front of headquarters—the Laredo air-drome was an almost exact replica of McMullen—and the two flyers and Trowbridge wasted no time.

"So long, son," boomed the sheriff as he clambered out. "You shore started a fine tea-party, and we're doin' our best to get even for yuh!"

"I'll meet you at the ship—I'll get your helmet and goggles," Kennard told him, and disappeared toward the tents.

By the time he had reached the ships the motors were gently idling, and the lean, lantern-jawed sergeant who had been warming up the McMullen plane nodded from the cockpit.

"All O.K., sir!"

The sheriff, his thick gray hair waving in the propeller-wash, was already ensconced in the back cockpit. His two guns were in the waistband of his trousers. Kennard handed him his helmet and goggles, and as he adjusted his own bent an ear to Captain Markham's words.

"Bailey and I will cruise up and down the river while you land at Carana," he shouted above the murmuring motors. "We may be too early, at that, you know. With you waiting in town and us watching from the air they don't stand much show. We've got our radio outfits, and in case anything goes wrong we'll wire it both here and McMullen. Take off first—good luck!"

Kennard nodded and climbed in the front cockpit of his ship. The radio-lite dials and figures on the maze of instruments before him stood out plainly. He read them swiftly—oil pressure, air pressure, temperature—all satisfactory. The battery was charging, and the motor firing rhythmically at five hundred revolutions. He clocked off one switch of the double-ignition system—no break in the even running of the twelve-cylinder Liberty. The other switch was just as good—not the sign of a miss. Slowly he eased the throttle on, until the tachometer showed fifteen hundred revolutions a minute. With bent head he listened, and could find no flaw. Motor shutters open, spark fully advanced, altitude adjustment o.k.——

He nodded to the mechanics on wings and tail. The wing men disappeared momentarily, and then reappeared dragging the wheel-blocks. He glanced up at the wind-indicator—take off was straight south, as he was headed. It meant going straight for the row of buildings, which were now ablaze with light.

He looked around at Trowbridge. The dauntless old-timer nodded, smiling grimly below his wildly blowing mustache. Kennard shoved the throttle forward smoothly, careful not to over-feed the motor. The big ship started in instant response. Within thirty yards the air-speed jumped to fifty miles an hour. Kennard locked the rudder bar with his feet, and the steady pressure of one hand on the stick brought the tail-skid off the ground. Sixty, seventy miles an hour, and the buildings were less than a hundred yards ahead.

It was one of the potentially deadly moments of flying—if the motor should fail there was nothing to do but pile up against the buildings. The pilot waited calmly, making sure of excess speed. The Liberty thrummed along without a break, and fifty yards from the blazing windows he pulled back on the stick, ever so slightly. The De Haviland took the air, and in a split-second Kennard had nosed over a trifle, driving along level, a foot above the ground. Then a quick, smooth pull, and the ship shot upward, clearing the buildings by a few feet. Instant leveling out before flying speed was gone, and then a bank to the right to circle the field and keep within gliding distance of it until it was a certainty that the Liberty was functioning perfectly.

He throttled from seventeen hundred revolutions to fifteen hundred, and while the ship droned around the air-drome his eyes never left the instruments. When he was finally satisfied that all was well the altimeter read twelve hundred feet. He swung eastward, and straightened out for the half-hour's run to Carana.

Not until then did he look downward at the fairy-land spread out below. The silvery flood of moonlight lent a touch of unearthly beauty to the world, and a soft shadow hid all that was ugly. The air-drome was like a doll settlement and the street lights of Laredo were ropes of blazing jewels. The International Bridge, studded with points of light, stretched in pale beauty over the placid silver ribbon that was the turgid Rio Grande. Motor-cars, like bugs with glowing eyes, crept along over tiny paths. It was a world in miniature, and more beautiful than a real world could possibly be.

The night air was smooth and cool, in contrast to the bumpy atmosphere which during daylight hours on the border makes a ship ride like a bucking bronco. The captain settled back behind the wind-shield, well protected from the terrific air-stream, and gave himself up to the rare pleasure of an ideal flight. He almost forgot the ever-present dangers, heightened by the darkness, which would be riding with them until that field at Carana came in sight.

Generally speaking, night-flying without special equipment is a straight-out gamble between death or serious injury and the motor. In this case, however, he felt that his knowledge of the terrane, plus the bright moonlight, would give them a fighting chance, whatever happened. Details such as ditches, humps on the ground, and other things which make all the difference in landing would be unplumbed mysteries if the motor should fail, but on the other hand he knew one or two fields, and there was always the river, which has been the watery grave of many a border ship—and a few border patrolmen, likewise. And over a considerable stretch of the course there was nothing but mesquite—and one could crash into the 'squite at night just as well as by day.

He never forgot his motor for more than thirty seconds at a time. From take off to landing, over country like that, the song of twelve mighty cylinders is the sweetest melody on earth. If a few notes are missing it often turns into a swan song.

Twenty minutes, and they had been hurtling along at a hundred miles an hour. Carana should come in sight any moment. There was no chance of missing it—the river made a big bend northward, and the apex pointed directly toward the little settlement in the wilderness. He turned around, grinned at the gigantic figure in the back seat, and then his eyes swept the sky. Finally he picked up the intermittent red flashes which located Markham and Bailey. Their ships were dark splotches against the heavens, five miles or more away and a trifle higher than the twenty-five hundred feet at which he was flying.

When he turned around and peered ahead the big bend was in sight. The field he had in mind—he had had a forced landing there a month before—was between the town and the river. It might have been plowed up by now——

He felt the sheriff grip him by the shoulder, and turned. The old man's eyes were blazing behind his goggles, and with his free hand he pointed diagonally downward, toward the river. The captain followed the pointing finger, but for a moment could see nothing. Then, as though by magic, something black came to the surface of the water, very close to the American shore. He could not tell whether it was man or beast but it was alive, and seemed to be struggling feebly to reach the shore.

HE THROTTLED to eight hundred "revs" and nosed down. The De Haviland shot earthward, wires screaming with the speed. They were only a thousand feet high when they reached a point directly over that mysterious figure in the water. It was a man—no doubt about that. He had reached the shore, and appeared to be clinging to the weeds on the bank. The captain threw his ship into a tight spiral, and circled downward. In a moment the man below crawled up on the bank. He was either half-dead with fatigue or badly hurt. He lay motionless on the ground, apparently unmindful of the roaring ship above him.

It demanded investigation, Kennard decided. It was inconceivable that any healthy man could be tired completely out crossing the river—it was possible to wade across it in most places.

At two hundred feet he straightened out and sized up the small sandy clearing nearest to the river. It was big enough, he decided—the mesquite thinned away to isolated trees for a hundred yards or so on each side of it, and probably he could weave through them pretty low and have a good approach. He dropped down to fifty feet, and then with wide-open motor roared along just above the prospective landing-place. So far as he could tell in the deceiving moonlight, it seemed fairly smooth. In the event of a crack-up, they were within five miles of Carana, anyhow.

As he turned for the landing he signaled his intention to Trowbridge, who nodded emphatically. As the ship headed toward its objective the pilot settled to his ticklish task. He cut the throttle half-way, and in the shallowest glide possible started downward. The speed of the ship was but seventy-five miles an hour, a small enough factor of safety.

Fifty yards from the clearing itself there were only isolated clumps of mesquite. His only chance to make the field without overshooting was to get so low that he could hit the ground at the very edge of the clearing. For a moment it was touch and go—one wing brushed an out-flung limb, but no damage was done. Like a flash Kennard cut the switches. Within ten yards of the edge he pulled the nose up, jockeying to kill his speed. The plane dropped six feet to the ground in a stall landing. It bounced, and for a second mushed through the air. He caught it this time with the stick pulled all the way back, and it hit on three points. He had fifty yards to spare when it finally stopped rolling.

"Pretty, cap, pretty!" boomed the sheriff. "Leave her runnin', eh? That *hombre* over there may mean somethin' or nothin'——"

"We might as well leave it idling," agreed Kennard as he climbed out.

They ducked through the mesquite toward the river, the captain's short legs twinkling to keep up with the sheriff's great strides. No breath was wasted in conversation, until they emerged from the chaparral close to the river.

"There he is," grunted the sheriff. "—— if he don't look to be dead."

He drew one gun, and Kennard's hand closed affectionately on his own, although he did not draw it from the holster. As they came closer the man moved, and they could hear a smothered groan.

He was lying on his face, and the flyer stooped and turned him over gently. The man's eyes flew open, and his lips moved spasmodically. The bosom of his khaki shirt was dripping with blood.

"It's one of the Italians!" said the grim-faced flyer slowly.

"The one that was doin' the translatin'," agreed Trowbridge.

The old man's eyes were closed to mere slits. Without further speech he dropped to his knees and tore away the shirt.

Kennard ran to the river and filled his helmet full of water.

"There ain't a chance for him," stated the sheriff. "He tried to say somethin', and then went dead to the world. Got a handkerchief that's fairly clean? I'll use mine to wash that hole."

With experienced dexterity he washed and bound the wicked bullet hole in the man's breast. Kennard's mind was busy with the possibilities. What had been almost a joke six hours a day had already turned into the grimmest of tragedies, it seemed. He wondered if the man could possibly be brought to consciousness long enough to talk.

"Get some more water, and we'll see what can be done," said Trowbridge. "We jest got to get somethin' from 'im."

The water, dashed into his face, caused the pallid Italian's lids to quiver. Trowbridge bent close to his ear.

"We're friends," he said distinctly in Spanish.

His voice boomed out into the still night with startling power. High overhead one of the Laredo planes was circling widely. The other one was farther down the river.

"Hear me? We're friends. Answer these questions if yuh can. Did Vertiga shoot you?"

The man's head moved slightly, and his lips hissed a "*sí*".

"What became of your friends?"

The sheriff put his ear to the man's very lips to hear the answer. He straightened, and looked around at the captain.

"The Vertigas shot every one of the wops and robbed 'em. Contracted to deliver 'em into this country somewheres, and then killed 'em. We can't ask this poor —— too much, but it must be they thought he was dead. Wait till I find out some more if I can."

Even Kennard, hardened by four years of war and three years on the border, was motionless with the horror of it as the terribly wounded Italian's gasping whispers strove to make the sheriff understand.

The effort soon proved too much for him. The eyelids raised, and his eyes glared horribly. He stiffened, as though trying to rise, and then sank back limply.

"He's gone," stated Trowbridge. "He tried his ——est, and from what little he was able to say it looks like the Vertigas was plannin' to leave Mexico for good, and were goin' all the way to San Antone with these aliens. If that's right, an' I think it is, they must've gone to Carana after horses or tansportation of some kind, and they may be there right now. Can we take off out o' that little sand spot, cap'n?"

"I think so."

"Let's go!"

Trowbridge led the way at an awkward lope that had Kennard breathing heavily to follow. As he stumbled along he tried to envisage the grim tragedy which had taken place but a few moments before. He wondered what had become of the other Italians—the Mexicans had sunk the dead bodies in the river, probably.

The sheriff dropped to a walk as they entered the clearing. His breath was coming in great gasps, and his weather-beaten face was red as fire.

"You'll have to take a wing and help turn me around," gasped the captain.

Trowbridge nodded, and took hold of the left wing-tip while Kennard climbed in the cockpit. He jazzed the motor twice to clean out the oil, and then taxied along slowly toward the end of the field. At his nod the sheriff threw his weight against the wing, and with rudder and stick and full throttle the pilot jockeyed his ship around.

Trowbridge clambered in and strapped himself while Kennard took a last survey of the prospects. Not very reassuring, but possible, he reflected, and shot the throttle ahead.

The DeHaviland was half-way across the moonlighted expanse of sand when Kennard decided that it would never clear the trees, but there was no turning back possible—and one chance to make it. He swerved slightly to the left, heading to one side of the narrow opening through which he had landed. Twenty yards from it, and heading straight for one sentinel tree, the ship took the air. For a split-second he held the roaring plane down, and then pulled back and to the right, and thrust on the right rudder. In a climbing turn the ship swerved upward through the opening, the right wing momentarily seeming to drag the ground. There was but little excess speed, and he was forced to level out immediately. For a second the ship stalled and mushed downward. The tail-skid was dragging through the top of a tree when the bomber picked up speed again. The next second it was driving upward, safely over all obstacles.

Kennard did not try for altitude—it was but three minutes flight to the field he had in mind. The air-speed read a hundred and thirty miles an hour as they flashed along a hundred feet above the ground. The rough road, scarcely more than a trail, leading southward from Carana slid beneath them, and the long, narrow field was just ahead.

It had been plowed and harrowed, evidently, but there had been no rain and there were no furrows. Without wasting an instant he banked around, cut the motor and shot for the field. Another stall landing to minimize the possibility of turning over in the soft earth—and they were safely at rest.

He left the motor idling again—it was a tough job go crank up with only one amateur helper—and was out of the cockpit almost before the ship had ended its short roll.

The sheriff was right behind him.

"Well, I guess we hit the trail yonder without delay, don't we?" said Kennard.

"The quicker the better, cap. I'll shore be downhearted if we don't get some news, anyway, in Carana. If them Vertigas was bound for San Antone—and Goodhue says they took a bag o' clothes along—it's a cinch they're either in Carana right now, or've been there. Ready to ramble?"

Kennard was, and they set forth for the ragged road that led north to Carana. A few pin-pricks of light, a half-mile northward, located the tiny settlement.

They had not proceeded a hundred yards up the road when the headlights of a car came in sight. It was making considerable speed toward them.

"If an air-plane landed in the middle of the Sahara there'd be a crowd around it within ten minutes," stated Kennard. "We'd better nab this bus back to town, hadn't we?"

"Uh-huh. It might be the Vertigas, though——"

"You get to one side behind the bushes and let me stop 'em. They can see my uniform, and even the Vertigas would have no reason to shoot. If it is them, they might open fire on you, regardless. They'd be bound for the river——"

"Yore right, cap. Prob'ly ain't them, though."

It proved to be Dalton, the only white inhabitant of Carana. He stopped without being halted. He was a tall, thin, freckled man of melancholy mien and incorrigible languor. The flivver was occupied to capacity by his washed-out wife and four children.

"'Lo, Dalton!" hailed the sheriff. "Howdy, Mrs. Dalton. Turn around and drive back to Carana, with us on the runnin'-board. Has there been three strange spigs hit town within the last hour—one thin old skunk with a scar on his face and two big ones—way bigger'n the average? They'd be carryin' bags, mebbe——"

"Yessir. I noticed 'em ride in while we was settin' out on the porch. 'Bout half an hour ago," admitted Dalton.

Without further speech he backed and turned. The sheriff and Kennard hopped on the running-boards, and the car started townward. They passed several horsemen galloping toward the plane, but the Vertigas were not among them. One man wheeled his horse and started back for town, across lots, thus cutting off nearly a quarter of a mile. The road wound around various ill-cultivated fields.

CARANA'S main and only street was about four hundred yards long and lined with shacks. The only store in the town was the tiny one-story building used by Dalton. Not a tree relieved the barrenness. Rickety fences separated huts from the bumpy dirt street, and the yards were full of curious peons. Dalton's store was open, in charge of his eldest son, and nearly twenty lounging Mexicans were gathered in front of it.

Trowbridge had been scrutinizing every one they passed.

"They must be in this bunch," he said to Kennard as the car drew up in front of the store. "All ready, cap? We got to get the drop."

"All set," returned Kennard, a pleasurable tingle running up and down his spine. The Colt automatic was in his hand as they clambered out in front of the startled, furtive crowd. Dalton, who was totally without curiosity and had not asked a question, remained in the car with his family.

They covered the crowd with their guns, and the sheriff's voice boomed forth into the silence in a flood of liquid Spanish. Kennard heard his own name mentioned, as well as the sheriff's and Vertiga's. Evidently Trowbridge had considered it wise for them to identify themselves. A Mexican on American soil is wary of the powers that be, for said powers on the border are quick and to the point in their handling of such foreigners as dispute their authority.

For a moment there was uneasy silence as the sheriff ceased talking. The flickering light of the oil-lamps in the store lent the last bizarre touch to the motionless knot of gaudily dressed men. The moonlight shone coldly from the gun-barrels. Up above, a far-away drone became noticeable—Captain Markham patrolling.

Trowbridge walked a few steps closer to the crowd, and appeared to be scrutinizing them closely. He finally picked out an undersized, bent little fellow with a tremendous drooping mustache. He called him Vincente, and addressed forcible conversation to him. After a second's hesitancy the man answered eagerly, and as though the tension had been broken others joined in with rapid speech and many gestures. Trowbridge asked one more question, and then turned toward the captain.

"They rode south on horses belonging to a spig, just as soon's they heard the plane. Man that owned the horses rode toward the plane. He was prob'ly the *hombre* that turned around as soon's he'd seen us. He was makin' for the Vertigas to tell 'em their suspicions was correct. Old Manuel must've knowed, or believed, I was in a plane and after the Goodhue incident didn't like the sound of a border patrol plane none whatever. They doubled back intuh Mexico. They ain't there yet—ain't got much start—but——"

"There are two loaded machine-guns on that ship, and she's ready to go!" snapped Kennard. "Mr. Dalton, out with the family, and drive like —— for the ship!"

Trowbridge started to speak, stopped, and then burst into Homeric laughter.

"We'll nip 'em at the finish!" he chuckled, as the flivver leaped forward. "Dalton, how was they dressed, just so we don't make no mistakes?"

The melancholy merchant told them over his shoulder—straw sombreros, all of them, and old man Vertiga in very light trousers. Under Trowbridge's urging the little car leaped lightly from bump to bump, and rattled its way to a point opposite the ship in three minutes. With a brief, "Thanks!" the two McMullen men started at a run for the idling De Haviland.

Once again the sheriff helped Kennard turn the ship at the end of the field. Taking advantage of the soft earth which held the wheel the captain took time to run the motor up a trifle and clean the cylinder thoroughly before he gave it the gun. There was ample room, this time, and long before they reached the fence he had rocked the ship out of the clinging earth and was in the air.

He drove straight for the river in as steep a climb as was consistent with safety. The dimly glowing dial of the altimeter stood at eleven hundred feet when he banked around, directly over the Rio Grande and started to circle. As he did so the sheriff prodded him and pointed. Three men were riding through the thin mesquite.

Captain Markham was spiraling down above them—evidently he had surmised that the end of the chase was near.

Kennard cut the throttle and started his dive. He and the sheriff had decided that they would give the fugitives one chance to take advantage of the processes of the law.

"Warn 'em, scare 'em, and then, if necessary, pepper 'em!" Trowbridge had agreed.

The Vertigas were fifty yards from the river when the De Haviland, scraping the tops of the trees, roared across their path. Trowbridge, like some giant of the air, stood erect in the back cockpit, and motioned them back. In instant reply there came three spurts of fire from the guns of the fleeing murderers.

Kennard grinned, and as he glanced at the sheriff the old man threw back his head and laughed—and then gasped as the terrific speed took his breath away.

Once again the great patrol ship swung around. They had plunged into the river by this time, and were wading toward Mexico. Down came the nose of the ship, headed straight down the middle of the placid stream. Kennard pressed the gun control, and in instant answer the water was churned into swirling ripples by the bullets.

Head turned to watch the effect, the pilot used his excess speed for a steep wing turn that reversed the ship's course in a few seconds. For a moment the three Mexicans paused. The captain thought they had given up hope for a moment.

Then they started again. The leader started to swim.

The captain was no weakling, but even so he was momentarily appalled at the task ahead of him. Then he remembered the bleeding wreck who had dragged himself from the river a few moments before, and the three other helpless aliens whose dead bodies were hidden, undoubtedly, by the river their murderers were striving to cross.

He cut the throttle part away, and aimed his ship at the three dots on the water. The ship, like a gargantuan monster of the air, swooped downward on its prey. A hundred feet from them the guns burst into their rattling song of destruction. For ten seconds they showered bullets.

Fifty feet over the water the throttled motor burst suddenly into a roar that seemed to fill the universe. The De Haviland quivered and shook in every strut and spar. Dim objects hurled past the startled airmen with the speed of light.

Before he knew what had happened the pilot had acted. Like a flash he cut the switches and came out of the dive, the wheels almost dipping into the water. Ahead of him the shattered remains of a propeller turned lazily.

The gearing which synchronizes machine gun fire so that the bullets fire through the whirling propeller had gone wrong, and he had shot his own stick off.

The DeHaviland was gliding close above the water, some of the speed of the dive yet remaining.

"Throw up your goggles and sit tight!" yelled the captain above the whine of the wires. "No danger!"

As the ship lost speed he jockeyed it to stay in the air until the very last remnant of it had gone. Nose in the air, the ship rushed downward. The water splashed upward as the ship hit the water. The motor plowed through it for a few feet, and the tail whipped into the air. For a second Kennard thought they were going to turn over, but they did not.

Only his head was out of the water when they came to rest, but it was the work of a few seconds to unsnap the belt and clamber out on a wing. The sheriff was creeping up the fuselage toward the uplifted tail, where the horizontal stabilizer supplied a perch partially in keeping with the sheriff's size.

Before there was a chance for mutual congratulation Captain Markham roared by, just above the water. He waved briefly and then circled northward. His ship dropped from sight.

"Landed," said the captain. "Did I get those birds, sheriff? I couldn't get a good view."

"Cold turkey," nodded Trowbridge, balancing cautiously. "Them bullets just rained all over 'em. The three of 'em was floatin' corpses in two seconds."

"Suppose one of us goes to Carana and telephones for help while the other rounds up the dead. No use of letting them float around. What do you want to do?"

"I'll stay here with the deceased. Have 'em send Bert Harlow down here with transportation fur the late spigs and that pore wop, will yuh?"

"Sure. I'll have one of the boys fly down after me in the morning, and send the wrecking truck along after the ship. Do you want to go home by plane?"

"I'd better stick here, I guess, and get things rounded up," said Trowbridge regretfully.

He pulled off his boots cautiously, preparing to start after the three victims of the machine-guns. Captain Kennard, without further ado, let himself down into the water and waded the few feet to shore. He had purposely landed as near the American shore as possible.

He met Markham on the road, and told the story to that delighted flyer, who accompanied him toward Carana. The discouraged-looking Dalton met them in his car, listened to the news without interest, and offered the use of the only telephone in Carana.

HAVING finally got the flight headquarters on the phone, he gave some brief orders, without going into any detail as to the necessity for them, and then bought overalls and flannel shirts for the sheriff and himself. Wet clothes were uncomfortable, in spite of the warm tropic night. Carana seemed all but deserted as they drove through it on the way back to the river. The inhabitants seemed to be both mystified and frightened. A few furtive onlookers peered from the shacks, but that was all.

Back at the river they found the sheriff standing guard over four dead men—he had laid the Italian alongside his murderers and the center of a group of whispering, frightened Mexicans who had evidently followed the flyers from town in an effort to find out what was in the wind. Trowbridge had just finished a terse speech to them evidently, for as the two pilots and Dalton walked up they scattered at the sheriff's final sentence. The car had been left where the road petered out, a quarter of a mile away.

"I'm glad you got them clothes—I'm shiverin' all my teeth out," remarked the sheriff, starting to change without delay. "Get McMullen all right?"

"Uh-huh. Everything set, I guess. I left your messages at the field and they'll get 'em to town."

Having changed his clothes, Kennard sat down with the other two and for three hours they indulged in random conversation given over mostly to sundry reminiscences of the sheriff's, who was reminded of many happenings in his stormy career. At two A.M. Deputy Bert Harlow arrived, and the four men each carried one of the victims to the waiting car.

"I'll wait around an' see whether I can pick up the *hombre* that warned Vertiga," stated Trowbridge. "Dalton says he ain't been back yet, that he knows of, and the rest of the spigs I've talked to says likewise. I'll snoop a little tomorruh. Yuh might send the car back after me, Luke. after yuh get rid o' these felluhs. I'll be ready tuh go about ten. Just want tuh look intuh Carana a little, an' there's no time like the present."

A half-hour after dawn Tex MacDowell landed. He heard the story with a mixture of delight and regret.

"I'd have given a finger to be in on it," he remarked. "You two must have been hopping around like leaping fleas. Sergeant Cary and a crew'll be in on the truck in a couple of hours, captain. Shall we wait around with the sheriff, or depart *pronto?*"

"No need tuh wait!" declared Trowbridge. "I'm just aimin' tuh snoop a little and have a talk with a few o' the worst-scared spigs yuh ever saw. It's as good a time as any tuh put the fear o' —— in 'em."

Captain Markham cranked up his ship and took off, and five minutes later Tex and the captain were ready.

"See you this afternoon, sheriff," grinned Tex. "The brass band'll sure be out to meet you now if I have to arrange it myself. That magazine is all over town, and with all this on top of it——"

Trowbridge fixed the grinning flyers with a fierce and war-like eye.

"If by word, action, or even thinkin', you generate any such devilment, which same yuh are both capable of, I'll put yuh under arrest, regardless. It'd be the trick of a sheep-herder."

"Which is the sheriff's last word on degradation," said Kennard. "Well, so long, sheriff. This has sure been a good bull-fight!"

"Right divertin'," chuckled Trowbridge. "*Adios!*"

The Camp-Fire

A Free-to-all Meeting Place for Readers Writers and Adventurers

Our Camp-Fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. Some whose voices we used to know have taken the Long Trail and are heard no more, but they are still memories among us, and new voices are heard, and welcomed.

We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance. The *spirit* of adventure lives in all men; the rest is chance.

But something besides a common interest holds us together. Somehow a real comradeship has grown up among us. Men can not thus meet and talk together without growing into friendlier relations; many a time does one of us come to the rest for facts and guidance; many a close personal friendship has our Camp-Fire built up between two men who had never met; often has it proved an open sesame between strangers in a far land.

Perhaps our Camp-Fire is even a little more. Perhaps it is a bit of leaven working gently among those of different station toward the fuller and more human understanding and sympathy that will some day bring to man the real democracy and brotherhood he seeks. Few indeed are the agencies that bring together on a friendly footing so many and such great extremes as here. And we are numbered by the hundred thousand now.

If you are come to our Camp-Fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There is no obligation except ordinary manliness, no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.

WHAT about this 71 brand branded on the horses' necks? The letter was written in 1922.

Chatanooga, Tennessee.

O. W. William's letter in "Camp-Fire" was good. I believe he is the first man who mentioned Billy the Kid's stepfather, Antrim. He had a brother named Jim Antrim who was a police officer in Wichita, Kansas, some time in the late '80's or early '90's.

I wonder if there are any of the old-timers in the Southwest wearing a 71 button who ever rode any of the horses branded 71 on the neck?—C. F. McCarty.

GETTING to a bunch of 1922 letters in our cache. Here's one about rifled barrels:

Thetford Mines, Quebec.

At Camp-Fire Comrade E. W. N. seems to imply that only flat spiral grooves could be properly called rifling. I have always understood that any form of spiral grooving in a barrel made the gun a rifle, and in this connection will state that the wrought iron field-guns made during the Civil War at Phœnixville, Pennsylvania, which had spiral grooves like saw-teeth, giving the muzzle the appearance of an internal ratchet, were spoken of as rifled field-guns. I have no quarrel with E. W. N. and, like him, offer this for what it is worth.—S. H. Ralston.

HERE'S an old-timer of the ranges, an ex-gob and a veteran of the Philippines. He knows the facts set forth in one of Frederick R. Bechdolt's articles and very likely he may be right in the minor corrections he makes. At the same time we have had it proved—and this comrade testified to the same general purpose—that the Bechdolt articles are about as close to fact, even in details, as they can be made so long after the event. Mr. Bechdolt has spent years in gathering his material and, like others, he had always found that a dozen men, all competent and honest, are likely to give a dozen slightly different versions of the same happenings:

Chicago.

I read with much interest the "Last of the Open Ranges," by Frederick R. Bechdolt, and for the benefit of any who may think it is fiction, I want to state that the story is absolute fact.

I HAPPEN to be an ex-puncher that was working in that country at that time. I just want to correct the author in one or two minor mistakes. The names of the two who were murdered—and that was sure what it was and cold-blooded at that—were Nate Champion and Ned Ray, not Nick. Also they were the only two in the cabin. Ned Ray went for water and was wounded and Nate Champion pulled him back to cover and fought the bunch and tended Ned and kept the diary. During the day, one man, Tom King by name, drove up with a load of hay and was held up by the gang. Tom was some rustler himself and would have been killed had they recognized him, but he got away on one of his horses and spread the alarm. Later on the bunch set fire to the load of hay and, pushing it ahead of them, set fire to the cabin and when Champion made his break they killed him and found the diary as the author describes.

This bunch was afterward surrounded at the H-Bar-H Ranch and was rescued by troops from Fort Russell, Cheyenne. The case came up in Nebraska later on, but never amounted to anything.

I WORKED in the Browns Park country also, and all the residents wanted to know when a stranger appeared was whether said stranger was a horse-thief or detective. They had a way of dispensing with any one they wanted to get rid of. They simply shot their man down when they found him on the range and then ran up a cow or steer and shot it. Any one finding the bodies simply thought it was another fellow caught killing beef and let it go at that.

I learned how to handle a cinch-ring in that part of the country and also how to jerk beef. We got so much per head for every maverick we branded and that was really the start of the trouble. The boys commenced using the running iron for themselves and then the stock men kicked.

ANY man who has been through the mill can readily see that the authors of the stories read in *Adventure* have had the experience. I punched cattle pretty much all over the Western country from 1880 to 1895. In 1895 I enlisted in the Navy and went to China, Japan and Corea. Was on one of Dewey's ships and the U. S. *Boston* at the Battle of Manila. On being discharged from the Navy, I enlisted in the 11th Vol. Cavalry and took a rap at Aguinaldo. Was sent home in 1900 and quit rambling and settled down, but it sure takes me back to the old days when I read our magazine.

JUST a little incident to show you how hard it is for an old puncher to break away from old habits. My wife and I attended a Wild West show some few years ago and one of these new-fangled cowboys climbed on a bronc; the bronc pitched some and this *hombre* began pulling leather. I forgot where I was and jumped up and commenced yelling: "Stay with him! Fan him! Ride him straight up! Fan him!" Just as we used to do in the days gone by. Every one rubbered at me and the wife was trying to pull me down in my seat when I finally came to. She never will go with me to any Western shows now. Well, never mind, old-timer. We have had our days and they don't have them any more like we had. All we can do is think of the fun and darned hard times we had in the days gone by.

Adios, amigos. Dios vaya con Uds.—F. W. CONNESS.

VINEGERONES, centipedes and esculpions. An American comrade in Mexico gives us some data and asks about the last-named:

Etzatlan, Jalisco, Mexico.

Compañero H. Challenger in *Adventure* of May 10th asks about the "vinegerone." I saw several in Guanacevi, Dgo; had them identified by the Indians. Looks bad but seemed sluggish and harmless. Indians said they would not sting unless you rolled on them in bed and got them "riled" when they would seize you with their nippers and sting you with their tails. Tail is about the size and length of a toothpick, black and hairy. Insect, apart from tail, about two inches long. Never heard of any one bitten by them.

ONE American was stung by a centipede there; sunk his claws in victim, apparently. Ammonia was rubbed on. Patient complained of severe pain, but I thought he was more scared than hurt.

I was stung repeatedly by an "alacran"—about like a bee's sting; after effect for three days like a severe scald. Used nothing but listerine on stings. Others complained of swelling of glands under jaws; one man claimed he had dizzy spells and obscured vision all day. Treated many natives who had been stung, with iodine externally and had them drink a glass of water with three drops of iodine. They say it does the work.

Has any one seen the "esculpion"? Indians say it is bad medicine, seems to be a lizard from their talk. I saw one stinging lizard, but no native was handy to identify it with the "esculpion."—B. C. D.

DIVING into our Camp-Fire cache, I came upon many letters that it is now too late to use. With some letters the element of timeliness is of little or no importance; with others it makes a decided difference—especially when there are five or ten or fifteen letters for enough space to hold one only. It's too bad, but I fear it can't be helped.

Ought to print the timely ones first? Well, I've tried that. For a while I kept on my desk all letters that seemed to need quick use, but it didn't work satisfactorily. Didn't give enough variety to an issue, and meantime there was no chance whatever for all the other letters.

We've never been able to systematize the handling of letters for "Camp-Fire." In the long run, the best way seems to be to leave it all to luck, occasionally giving a quick printing to some letters with a special need of it.

IT'S A long way from being his first cover for our magazine, this one on the present issue, but, as you know, our artists are now for the first time being dragged right out into the firelight where all of us can get really acquainted with them:

Greenwich, Conn.

The problem of introducing myself to a bunch of men by mail requires much thought, and the more I think about it, the less I get anywhere, so I am going to go ahead, as is, without any forethought and I hope that here in the dark around the Camp-Fire you will get some idea of what my number is.

I'M AN American, thirty-five years old; ancestors fought for that glorious freedom so we can go fishing with dry bait. Don't vote. College man. Belong to the Salmagundi Club, and pessimistic as a Sioux Indian.

Been painting pictures for fifteen years—"real" pictures, you know, to hang up with frames on and everything—then got maimed and had to go to work, that is painting magazine covers. All right, go ahead and laugh, but I insist it's work. Why, my friend George Inness used to say it takes a man forty years to learn how to use a brush. But I have painted many things without a brush. A knife. It's quicker and cheaper. Steel outwears bristles and after a few years of use becomes sharp enough to shave with. So when you see an artist with a beard you know he paints with a brush and the half-way ones use both.

This magazine stands as a very important milestone in my life and I think a whole lot of it and the men who run it—not that it enabled me to pay my first month's rent, but for the spirit of real manliness that I believe is there.

THE bathroom sprung a leak the other day and made a beautiful sky effect on the wall-paper. A dark brown ship painted over it made an *Adventure* cover. By knocking over the mast and cutting out the ferryboats, canoes, Palisades and perfume factories, we have a wreck in the middle of the Atlantic ocean developed from a schooner at anchor in the Hudson River. Columbus and his three ships easily develop from musing over a box of Johnson's baby talcum powder. Red Cross, you know. And so it goes.

My ambition is to paint a sea picture that Bill Adams can look at and smell tar and bilge water.

Well, I'll sit down now, fill my seventeen-year-old pipe for the three hundred and six thousandth time and let another of the fellows spill a talk.—H. C. MURPHY, JR.

DON'T forget that most of our original cover paintings are for sale to the highest bidders. Minimum bid, ten dollars.

HERE is an example of how restricted immigration fails to restrict. There are plenty of examples of other kinds extending along the Canadian and Mexican borders and more or less along both the Pacific and the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. They would extend farther, but those are the only boundaries we have.

The case happens to involve Jews. Just happens to. Dodging immigration restrictions isn't confined to Jews.

A letter from a Camp-Fire comrade:

Lincoln, Nebraska.

Enclosed you will find a clipping from the latest edition of the Lincoln *Star* of May 3, 1923, concerning the prevented deportation of a woman because she could not pass the mental tests at Ellis Island. Congressman Samuel Dickstein was the man who blocked the deportation with a writ of habeas corpus, issued by Federal Judge Julian Mack. This incident occurred at Ellis Island.

I don't believe that a case of this kind should go unprotested and I take this occasion to voice my displeasure of this Congressman's action.—JOSEPH EVERETT WARD.

The newspaper clipping follows:

Congressman Samuel Dickstein just arrived at Ellis Island in time to prevent the deportation of Esther Kaplan on the *Bayern*. Esther is said to be below the standard mentality of a person of her age and faced the ordeal of life in a strange country without relatives or friends, until the congressman rushed up waving the writ of habeas corpus issued by Federal Judge Julian Mack. Dickstein claims that her nervousness was caused by dodging pogroms before she came here in 1914, resulted in her low mentality.

June 18th I wrote the Honorable Samuel Dickstein, a congressman for New York City. Receiving no reply after a long wait, wrote him again, August 24th, as follows:

August 24, 1923.

June 18th I sent you a letter of which the following is a copy. The name in the first letter was incorrectly typed "S. Kaplan." It should have been Esther Kaplan as in this copy:

"My attention has been brought to a newspaper statement to the effect that you were personally instrumental in preventing the deportation of Esther Kaplan, said to be below standard mentality for immigrants, and that your ground for this action was the claim that her condition was caused by pogroms before she came here in 1914.

"On the face of things it was difficult to understand what bearing the cause of an immigrant's low standard of mentality can have upon the fact that the low standard exists and is in itself a legal reason for deportation. One should not pass judgment, however, on the mere newspaper statement of the case and I shall be very glad if you'll give me the facts from your point of view so that I may publish it in this magazine along with the complaint from one of our readers against your action in this matter.

"Your not replying, of course, will be taken to mean that reported newspaper statement of the case presents all you have to say in the matter."

As its envelope carried our return address and as we have received no reply from you, I take it you admit the correctness of the above newspaper statement and do not care to make any reply. To give you double opportunity, however, I am sending you this letter. Lack of reply from you within reasonable time will confirm your attitude of not caring to reply.

The absence of any reply to either letter does not intend to throw any favorable light on Congressman Samuel Dickstein, but further investigation serves to show he is only a minor figure in the case—merely one of the cogs set in motion to prevent Esther Kaplan's being deported according to law.

An attorney investigated the records of the case and reported as follows:

Dear Sir: In the matter of the writ of habeas corpus for Esther Kaplan:

I WENT to the United States District Court and found on file the writ requiring the Immigration Commissioner to produce Esther Kaplan in Court on April 27th last. There were also on file papers showing that after hearing argument upon the writ, decision was reserved, but permitting Esther Kaplan to remain in the country pending the decision upon furnishing bail bond of $1,000. This bail was furnished by the New Amsterdam Casualty Company.

There appeared on record no memorandum of any determination of the writ. I then talked with one of the Assistant District Attorneys who was familiar with this matter, and he informed me that toward the end of 1914 Esther Kaplan arrived in this country from Russia and, being unable to pass the tests, was held for deportation. The condition of Europe and Russia was such that it was felt to be unsafe and inhuman to deport anybody there if it could be arranged that they should be taken care of by some one here until an opportune time to deport them should arrive.

Some Jewish charitable organization gave security for the safekeeping and support of Esther Kaplan until it should be deemed safe to deport her, and she was kept and supported by the Jewish organization until April, 1923, when the Immigration Commissioner undertook to deport her to Russia.

A WRIT of habeas corpus was obtained directing the Commissioner of Immigration to show why she should not be permitted to stay in this country. The argument in support of the writ, as reported to me, seems rather shallow, it being that, she having been in the country since 1914, she had become a resident and could not be deported. I was unable, however, to see the briefs in support of that argument and do not know what else there may be to it. Judge Mack, who granted the writ, referred the whole matter to Judge Goddard; briefs have been filed with Judge Goddard personally, for and against the writ, and I am informed that he has not as yet handed down a decision.

Counsel for Esther Kaplan is Elijah N. Zoline, 233 Broadway, and it does not appear that Samuel Dickstein had very much to do with the matter. Possibly an inquiry addressed to Mr. Zoline as to the grounds for opposing the deportation might bring some response.

Let us grant that it was unsafe and inhuman to deport her at the time she failed to pass the tests. Just how safe and wise it is to set aside definite laws in individual cases is a question open to debate. Let us, however, voice no objection to the exception for the benefit of Esther Kaplan, accepting the action as merely a temporary stay of justice.

But Esther Kaplan stayed in this country over eight years on that "temporary" stay—until April, 1923. All things considered, that seems a very, very fair margin of safety. Anyhow, the Immigration Commissioner failed to act for eight years.

A Jewish organization took care of her here for eight years. And then two lawyers, one of them a congressman, whose names suggest Jewish origin, take steps and a plea is entered that the very eight-year favor granted Esther Kaplan entitled her to set at naught the law that spared her! Truly a wonderful plea. A plea suggesting willingness to flout law and common-sense justice by the aid of any technicality that can be seized upon. A plea that stinks.

It would seem an instance arguing against setting aside definite laws in individual cases—and against kindness to people ready to bite the hand bearing the kindness.

I have written to Elijah N. Zoline, but there has not yet been time for a reply.

The incident itself is a small and petty one, but it is significant of things that will inevitably dry-rot this country to her ruin unless checked by a tremendous effort. Unfortunately there isn't only one Honorable Samuel Dickstein in public office, exhibiting just such examples of sacrificing the public weal for individual or racial ends. The name may be Irish, German, English, Italian, Scandinavian, anything. The breed is not limited to any race or creed. And we let them get away with it. It's time we began *not* letting them get away with it.

Such immigration restriction as we have is constantly being made ineffective by those with some interests of their own at stake, too often by those in public office.

There is no really effective remedy save one—*stop all immigration.*

SELDOM does Camp-Fire have to listen to praise of our own writers, but when so much and such enthusiastic testimony pours in from you readers as it has in the case of Leonard H. Nason, it is only common decency to make some public acknowledgement of the tribute—or rather to let one of the many who write in speak for all of them. It is the veterans who are best able to judge how realistically Mr. Nason's stories paint the actual soldier life of the Great War, and it is the veterans who most acclaim him.

Frankly, has any one else done it any better?

Camp B, Coquille, Oregon.

Am still in this locality, prospecting the hills and panning the creeks with fair success. Enough anyway for an old-timer like myself.

YOU have certainly made a find in young Nason, as his stories are so natural as to be classed almost as facts. I spent some time "Over There" myself, even at my age, and this lad Nason has the proper dope.

No glorious hero stuff, but the real talk and ideas. "—— the cross, look at my five hundred francs" as his character *Artie* says, just about expresses the feelings of 99% of the boys who hated gush, crabbed at everything and died or lived as heroes without a press agent. It was the same in the Philippines in '98 and '99 and will be the same as long as we retain that faculty of throwing the "bull" to cover real feeling and treating everything that happens as a joke.

The 90% will laugh a "Debs," a Billy Sunday, the Ku Klux, Capital, Wall Street, I. W. W., communist, Bolshevik, all extremes, into harmlessness, although gradually adopting the best of their teachings. Sounds awful bourgeois, doesn't it, but it is the truth and I realize it more year by year. When I was twenty I was an anarchist, before the Haymarket Riot, but now I am not even pink. From that I was a Populist, then a Socialist, and now I am a philosopher. Wish you luck.—P. H. HART.

AS THE reference to one of the *Captain Blood* stories suggests, this letter was written back in 1921 and has just made its way out of our cache. Who else remembers Don Diego Alvarez?

Paris, France.

The euphony of the title of Sabatini's story "Don Diego Valdez" recalled to me a character whom I used to know down in Mexico; old Don Diego Alvarez. It was about 1895 and I was on a prospecting trip which led me to Acapulco, and during my stay there, old Don Diego marched into town one day with forty Indians armed with Winchesters, ran Don Porfirio's tin soldiers into the sea and took possession of the town. Then he told the merchants of the place that, for three months, the customs would be just one-half the regular rate and for them to wire San Francisco for lots of merchandise.

They took the hint and brought in enough to last them for two years; for if they had not, Don Diego would have found other means to get to them; but as it was, he was content to collect the duties he thought right and at the end of three months he marched his men back to his little mountain village up in the Sierra Madre.

I MET him while he was in Acapulco and he told me that there were show out-croppings on his lands which might prove of some value and invited me to go up and visit him and these ore-shoots, which I did. I remember that in the office of his hacienda he had just two pictures of what he called the "great American Liberators," Washington and Grant, whom he greatly admired. He was then eighty and died shortly after, to the great relief of Don Porfirio to whom he had always been like a bunion. He was too far away from the capital—it was a seven days' horseback ride—and in a country so wild that thousands of troops would never have caught him.

I remember, also, that while on my visit to him I had a slight attack of yellow fever which I had contracted on a lime-juicer just up from Panama which I had visited just before going up to Don Diego's place. Of course, there was no doctor within forty miles, but with castor-oil and lime-juice I pulled through all right.

THAT reminds me that I have ridden horse-back across the American Continent about five times, which sound like some journeys, does it not? And some of them *were* long enough, in all conscience, for I have ridden from Tampico to Manzanillo; from Vera Cruz to Acapulco; across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Isthmus of Panama. The five times means that some of these trips were made in both directions.

As my work of engineering has taken me up and down the highways and the byways of the earth I have learned that this life is just one continual adventure if one only has his eyes open; and even if he is blind, I think he could have a pretty good time if he has the right spirit. What is "adventure"? The ability to see new and interesting things in life, day after day. To my mind, adventure does not mean just the risk of life and limb in the wilds—for one takes more chances crossing 5th Ave. or the Place de l'Opera than I did back in the 'nineties riding thousands of miles along through the Mexican mountains. And just so, one can find as much adventure in New York or Chicago or even Philadelphia (now don't laugh; I love Philadelphia) as one may in the Rockies or "somewhere East of Suez."

OF COURSE I went through the last War; without any glory, but I did my bit. My paternal ancestor landed in America in 1635 and the maternal fore-father in 1637 and their sons served in the armies of every war we ever had and I just *had* to come and what do you think they made me do over here:—*build hospitals and things for over a year* and then sent me up on the front with the Heavy Railway Artillery just about the time the whistle blew! It used to be a joke among my friends that each time I came to Paris during that year the Bosche bombed the town, and I remember the night of January 28th, '18, when the worst raid of the whole year took place. One bomb wrecked the house next-door to the hotel I was in and I slept right through it.—WALTER DENMAN.

HIS letters were not intended for publication, but, because there was so much of interest in them, I persuaded Colonel Morgan to let me pass parts of them on to you. Service on the old *Constitution*, Confederate blockade runner, Egyptian Army, Mexico—but read for yourself. Here is a man entitled to the term "adventurer" in the highest sense of the word. His autobiography was pertinent to the matters that caused him to write to me—and I'm very glad it was. Colonel James Morris Morgan has seen and helped make a deal of history.

> Washington, D. C.
>
> I was born in New Orleans—in 1845 and was a midshipman on board of the historical frigate *Constitution* when the Civil War commenced in 1861. I resigned and entered the Confederate Navy. Was the midshipman aid of Commodore Hollins commanding the Confederate flotilla on the Mississippi. His flagship, the *McRae*, was sunk when Admiral Farragut captured New Orleans. I afterward served at Richmond and Charleston, S. C., and in October, 1862, ran the blockade out of that port and joined the Confederate cruiser *Georgia* engaged in destroying commerce on the high seas. Returning to the Confederacy in July, 1864, I ran the blockade into Wilmington, N. C., and served in the naval batteries on the James River below Richmond until the end came.
>
> I AM the only survivor of those who accompanied Mrs. Jefferson Davis south when Richmond was captured—in fact, Col. Harrison, Mr. Davis' private secretary, and myself were the only men in the party.
>
> I am the only survivor of the American officers who accompanied General Charles P. Stone, U. S. A., to Egypt in 1869 and entered the Khedive's Army.
>
> In 1880 I accompanied the famous Governor Shepherd, popularly called the "Boss" of the District of Columbia, to Mexico in search of a silver mine. I was in charge of the conductas of silver, taking it to either Mazatlan on the Pacific coast or to the city of Chihuahua for shipment to the United States.
>
> In 1883 I was engaged with my old Egyptian commander General Stone, who was the chief engineer in the erection of the "Statue of Liberty" in New York harbor. I am the only one of his assistants left.
>
> In 1885 Mr. Cleveland appointed me Consul General to Australasia with headquarters at Melbourne.
>
> Since 1889 I have resided in Washington, D. C. I am the author of "The Recollections of a Rebel Reefer," published by Houghton Mifflin Company and which for a five-dollar book has met with quite a large sale, having gone through the first edition and is still selling.

As Colonel Morgan once suggested, his epitaph might at least with truth be: "He Was a Great Survivor." May it be a long time before he has ceased earning that inscription.

Here is a bit from another letter:

> We have a small club here which is called the "Chums Club" and was founded by my dear classmate, the late Rear Admiral Charles E. Clark, the man who ran the *Oregon* around the continent during the Spanish war and fought her so magnificently at Santiago when Cervera's fleet was destroyed. This little club is composed of men who served on both sides in the Civil War and among the few left are Rear Admiral J. C. Watson, who was Admiral Farragut's flag lieutenant on board the *Hartford* in all of his great battles. Watson was also engaged in the Spanish war. Captain H. H. Marmaduke, who was a midshipman in the *Merrimac* and is the sole surviving officer of that ship when she fought the *Congress*, *Cumberland* and *Monitor* in Hampton roads. Admiral Chester of recent "Turkish concession" fame, who was an ensign on board the sloop-of-war *Richmond* in the battle of Mobile Bay and also served in the Spanish war.
>
> Our age limit is seventy-six years and we get our fun out of our reminiscences, and many of the adventures that some of these men have had would make the wildest fictionist sit up and take notice.

The mention of that club was also pertinent to the matters under discussion. To be frank, a few years ago I should have, with regret, carefully omitted mention at Camp-Fire of such a club. You see, Colonel Morgan's letter goes on to state that our magazine is a familiar one to its members and I should have omitted mentioning that fact at Camp-Fire lest the club's distinguished members might feel a bit put out over a printed statement that they were readers of a "popular fiction magazine." I have done just that in hundreds of similar cases, but things have been changing and there is no longer need of such omissions.

IT'S been a long, hard fight for this particular "popular fiction magazine" with its cheap paper and sensational name to surmount these handicaps and win a fair recognition of whatever merit it may have, which is all the recognition it asks. There are those of you who from the first judged it from its actual contents, not from its outward appearance, but there have been more who condemned it without a trial, judging from appearances only. There are still many who will not look at it and would feel ashamed to be seen with it in their hands, their perhaps unconscious test of literary value being whether a story is printed on calendered paper, and others whose sole test is whether a story appears in certain magazines that tradition, generally rightfully, has labeled as having literary standing. I fear most of us are prone to form opinions on various matters from just such illogical and unjust premises.

It has been very hard on our magazine. For *Adventure* has not been aimed at the type of reader who does not know good from bad in fiction and consequently draws few readers from that type. It has been aimed at people of intelligence, at people whose ordinary reading may be decidedly "highbrow" but who enjoy turning to stories of action with "problems" and without smut, if they can find such stories sufficiently well done not to offend their literary sensibilities. And, of course, this is the very class who so often have refused even to consider our magazine as a possible source of such stories and have refused to give it a hearing.

BUT our magazine has fought its way through. People it could never have reached by itself have been made readers by some friend whose judgment they respect and who had "discovered" it himself or through the recommendation of other friends. An admiral need no longer blush to be "caught" as a reader of *Adventure*. As a matter of fact, I've an idea that most of our admirals read it and that in either Army or Navy you'll find plenty of *Adventure* readers from buck private and flatfoot clear on up. And if you took a census of statesmen, ministers, priests, lawyers, bankers, educators, engineers, doctors, solid business men and all the rest of our "highbrow" classes, you'd find that being a reader of our magazine is decidedly a distinction instead of a stigma.

Indeed, the real point is that most of our readers now realize this without taking any general census. The correspondence coming to my desk is ample proof of this, both in its statement and in the standing and quality of those who write. No, I don't think the "Chum's Club" will squirm any over being known as readers of *Adventure*. They probably know plenty of other distinguished men who also are readers.

Probably this all sounds like a very blatant blowing of our own horn. Maybe it is just that. But consider the fellow who for over thirteen years has been fighting to get real recognition for the magazine from the one class of people at whom it was aimed. It's been hard to get, mighty hard. Now we've got it. Let the poor fellow rejoice a little. And let him thank you who have really done the getting of it. Our magazine has come through because its friends have carried it through.

ONE thing I'd like to qualify. When I use the word "highbrow" I do not use the narrow sense of the word. I mean it in the man who has discrimination and independent judgment. There may be a hole in the seat of his pants, he may never have seen a college, he may not know whether Walter Pater is a race-horse or plays on a minor league team. But he knows a good piece of fiction when he sees it and he doesn't give a —— whether it happens to be printed on deckel-edged, high grade stock or on brown wrapping-paper.

Camp-Fire's salutations to the "Chums' Club," to men who have done things and been rewarded for their manner of doing them. May we all, each in his own line, be equally deserving and equally fortunate. If we can not, at least we can salute.

To Colonel Morgan our gratitude as well as our salutations. He has introduced us to a very gallant gentleman who makes the name adventurer a proud one. And somehow I would like to rise and salute the Confederacy my own people fought against, the Lost Cause served so splendidly by so many real Americans.—A. S. H.

SERVICES TO OUR READERS

Lost Trails, for finding missing relatives and friends, runs in alternate issues from "Old Songs that Men Have Sung."

Old Songs That Men Have Sung, a section of "Ask Adventure," runs in alternate issues from "Lost Trails."

Camp-Fire Stations: explanation in the second and third issues of each month. Full list in second issue of each month.

Various Practical Services to Any Reader: Free Identification Card in eleven languages (metal, 25 cents); Mail Address and Forwarding Service; Back Issues Exchanged; Camp-Fire Buttons, etc., runs in the last issue of each month.

VARIOUS PRACTICAL SERVICES TO ANY READER

These services of *Adventure,* mostly free, are open to any one. They involve much time, work and expense on our part, but we ask in return only that you **read and observe the simple rules,** thus saving needless delay and trouble for us. The whole spirit of the magazine is one of friendliness. No formality between editors and readers. Whenever we can help we're ready and willing to try. **Remember: Magazines are made up ahead of time. Allow for two or three months between sending and publication.**

Identification Cards

Free to any reader. Just send us (1) your name and address, (2) name and address of party to be notified, (3) a stamped and self-addressed return envelope.

Each card bears this inscription, printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of *Adventure,* New York, stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one or two friends, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. Names and addresses treated as confidential. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for business identification. Cards furnished free *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application.* We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Metal Cards—For twenty-five cents we will send you *post-paid,* the same card in aluminum composition, perforated at each end. Enclose a self-addressed return envelope, but no postage. Twenty-five cents covers everything. Give same data as for pasteboard cards. Holders of pasteboard cards can be registered under both pasteboard and metal cards if desired, but old numbers can not be duplicated on metal cards. If you no longer wish your old card, destroy it carefully and notify us, to avoid confusion and possible false alarms to your friends registered under that card.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give in full the names and addresses of self and friend or friends when applying.*

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Expeditions and Employment

While we should like to be of aid in these matters, experience has shown that it is not practicable.

Back Issues of *Adventure*

The Boston Magazine Exchange, 24 *T Wharf, Boston, Mass., can supply* Adventure *back through* 1918, *and occasional copies before that.*

WILL BUY: All issues from Vol. 1, No. 1, up to 1920. Write giving dates, price and condition.—Address R. C. WRIGHT, 119 N. Derbigny St., New Orleans, La.

WILL SELL: All issues, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920 and 1921. One hundred and twenty-five issues in all. Ten cents per issue; $12.50 for the lot, buyer to pay freight. Also twelve issues of *Romance,* Nov., 1919 to Oct., 1920. $3.00 for the lot, buyer to pay postage.—Address GEO. L. HICKMAN, 2304 Nicholas St., Philadelphia, Pa.

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WILL SELL: All issues, April, 1921 to Dec. 31, 1923 except four issues. 89 copies all in good condition. Best offer takes the lot.—Address F. P. ROBERTSON & SONS, Flemingsburg, Ky., R. D. 2.

WILL SELL: Dec., 1911; Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec., 1916; Jan., Feb., June, July, Aug., Nov., Sept., 1917. Five cents each, plus postage. Also 14 issues of 1922, ten cents each plus postage.—Address O. C. KLEIN, Box 626, Vicksburg, Miss.

Manuscripts

Glad to look at any manuscripts. We have no "regular staff" of writers. A welcome for new writers. *It is not necessary to write asking to submit your work.*

When submitting a manuscript, if you write a letter concerning it, enclose it *with* the manuscript; do *not* send it under separate cover. Enclose stamped and addressed envelope for return. All manuscripts should be typewritten double-spaced, with wide margins, not rolled, name and address on first page. We assume no risk for manuscripts or illustrations submitted, but use all due care while they are in our hands. Payment on acceptance.

We want only clean stories. Sex, morbid, "problem," psychological and supernatural stories barred. Use almost no fact-articles. Can not furnish or suggest collaborators. Use fiction of almost any length; under 3,000 welcomed.

Camp-Fire Stations

Our Camp-Fire is extending its Stations all over the world. Any one belongs who wishes to. Any member desiring to meet those who are still hitting the trails may maintain a Station in his home or shop where wanderers may call and receive such hospitality as the Keeper wishes to offer. The only requirements are that the Station display the regular sign, provide a box for mail to be called for and keep the regular register book and maintain his Station in good repute. Otherwise Keepers run their Stations to suit themselves and are not responsible to this magazine or representative of it. List of Stations and further details are published in the Camp-Fire in the first issue of each month. Address letters regarding stations to J. Cox.

Camp-Fire Buttons

To be worn on lapel of coat by members of Camp-Fire—any one belongs who wishes to. Enameled in dark colors representing earth, sea and sky, and bears the numeral 71—the sum of the letters of the word Camp-Fire valued according to position in the alphabet. Very small and inconspicuous. Designed to indicate the common interest which is the only requisite for membership in Camp-Fire and to enable members to recognize each other when they meet in far places or at home. Twenty-five cents, post-paid, anywhere.

When sending for the button enclose a strong, self-addressed, *unstamped* envelope.

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Missing Friends or Relatives

(*See Lost Trails*)

Mail Address and Forwarding Service

This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding address for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied.

Addresses

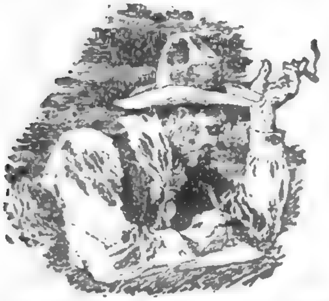
Camp-Fire—Any one belongs who wishes to.

Rifle Clubs—Address Nat. Rifle Ass'n of America, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Washington, D. C.

(*See also under "Standing Information" in "Ask Adventure."*)

Ask Adventure

A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts.



QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the section in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert may give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached*, are enclosed. (See footnote at bottom of page.) Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose section it seems to belong.**

1. The Sea Part 1 American Waters
BERIAH BROWN, 1624 Biegelow Ave., Olympia, Wash. Ships, seamen and shipping; nautical history, seamanship, navigation, yachting, small-boat sailing; commercial fisheries of North America; marine bibliography of U. S.; fishing-vessels of the North Atlantic and Pacific banks. (*See next section.*)

2. The Sea Part 2 British Waters
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, care *Adventure*. Seamanship, navigation, old-time sailorizing, ocean-cruising, etc. Questions on the sea, ships and men local to the British Empire go to Captain Dingle, not Mr. Brown.

3. The Sea Part 3 Statistics of American Shipping
HARRY E. RIESBERG, 3633 New Hampshire Ave., N. W., Washington, D. C. Historical records, tonnages, names and former names, dimensions, services, power, class, rig, builders, present and past ownerships, signals, etc., of all vessels of the American Merchant Marine and Government vessels in existence over five gross tons in the United States, Panama and the Philippines, and the furnishing of information and records of vessels under American registry as far back as 1760.

4. Islands and Coasts Part 1 Islands of Indian and Atlantic Oceans; the Mediterranean; Cape Horn and Magellan Straits
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, care *Adventure*. Ports, trade, peoples, travel. (*See next section.*)

5. Islands Part 2 Haiti, Santo Domingo, Porto Rico, Virgin and Jamaica Groups
CHARLES BELL EMERSON, Adventure Cabin, Los Gatos, Calif. Languages, mining, minerals, fishing, sugar, fruit and tobacco production.

6. ★ New Zealand; and the South Sea Islands Part 1 Cook Islands, Samoa
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7. South Sea Islands Part 2 French Oceania (Tahiti, the Society, Paumoto, Marquesas); Islands of Western Pacific (Solomons, New Hebrides, Fiji, Tonga); of Central Pacific (Guam, Ladrone, Pelew, Caroline, Marshall, Gilbert, Ellice); of the Detached (Wallis, Penrhyn, Danger, Easter, Rotuma, Futuna, Pitcairn).
CHARLES BROWN, JR., P. O. Box 308, San Francisco, Calif. Inhabitants, history, travel, sports, equipment, climate, living conditions, commerce, pearling, vanilla and coconut culture.

8. ★ Australia and Tasmania
FRANK MORTON, care *Triad* magazine, 19 Castlereagh St., Sydney, Australia. Customs, resources, travel, hunting, sports, history. (*Postage ten cents.*)

9. Malaysia, Sumatra and Java
FAY-COOPER COLE, Ph. D., Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Ill. Hunting and fishing, exploring, commerce, inhabitants, history, institutions.

10. ★ New Guinea
L. P. B. ARMIT, Port Moresby, Territory of Papua, via Sydney, Australia. Hunting and fishing, exploring, commerce, inhabitants, history, institutions. Questions regarding the measures or policy of the Government or proceedings of Government officers not answered. (*Postage ten cents.*)

11. Philippine Islands
BUCK CONNOR, L. B. 4., Quartzsite, Ariz. History, inhabitants, topography, customs, travel, hunting, fishing, minerals, agriculture, commerce.

12. Hawaiian Islands and China
F. J. HALTON, 714 Marquette Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Customs, travel, natural history, resources, agriculture, fishing, hunting.

★ (Enclose addressed envelop with ten cents in stamps NOT attached)

13. Japan
Grace P. T. Knudson, Castine, Me. Commerce, politics, people, customs, history, geography, travel, agriculture, art, curios.

14. Asia Part 1 Arabia, Persia, India, Tibet, Burma, Western China, Borneo
Captain Beverley Giddings, Morgan City, La. Hunting, exploring, traveling, customs.

15. Asia Part 2 Siam, Andamans, Malay Straits, Straits Settlements, Shan States and Yunnan
Gordon MacCreagh, 21 East 14th St., New York. Hunting, trading, traveling, customs.

16. Asia Part 3 Coast of Northeastern Siberia, and Adjoining Waters
Capt. C. L. Oliver, P. O. Box 2882, Tampa, Fla. Natives, language, mining, trading, customs, climate. Arctic Ocean: Winds, currents, depths, ice conditions, walrus-hunting.

17. Asia Part 4 North China, Mongolia and Chinese Turkestan
George W. Twomey, M. D., 41 Rue de France, Tientsin, China. Natives, languages, trading, customs, climate and hunting.

18. Africa Part 1 Sierra Leone to Old Calabar, West Africa, Southern and Northern Nigeria
Robert Simpson, care *Adventure*. Labor, trade, expenses, outfitting, living conditions, tribal customs, transportation.

19. ✠ Africa Part 2 Transvaal, N. W. and Southern Rhodesia, British East, Uganda and the Upper Congo
Charles Beadle, care of Ramsey Direct Service, 44 Rue d' Hauteville, Paris, France. Geography, hunting, equipment, trading, climate, transport, customs, living conditions, witchcraft, adventure and sport. (*Postage 12 cents.*)

20. Africa Part 3 Cape Colony, Orange River Colony, Natal and Zululand
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21. ✠ Africa Part 4 Portuguese East
R. G. Waring, Corunna, Ontario, Canada. Trade, produce, climate, opportunities, game, wild life, travel, expenses, outfits, health, etc. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

22. Africa Part 5 Morocco
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23. Africa Part 6 Tripoli
Captain Beverley Giddings, care *Adventure*. Including the Sahara Tuaregs and caravan routes. Traveling, exploring, customs, caravan trade.

24. Africa Part 7 Egypt, Tunis, Algeria
(Editor to be appointed.) Travel, history, ancient and modern; monuments, languages, races, customs, commerce.

25. Africa Part 8 Sudan
W. T. Moffat, Sudan Customs Sinkat, Red Sea Province, Sudan, Africa. Climate, prospects, trading, traveling, customs, history. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

26. Turkey and Asia Minor
(Editor to be appointed.) Travel, history, geography, races, languages, customs, trade opportunities.

27. Bulgaria, Roumania
(Editor to be appointed.) Travel, history, topography, languages, customs, trade opportunities.

28. Albania
Robert S. Townsend, 1447 Irving St., Washington, D. C. History, politics, customs, languages, inhabitants, sports, travel, outdoor life.

29. Jugo-Slavia and Greece
Lieut. William Jenna, Plattsburg Barracks, N. Y. History, politics, customs, geography, language, travel, outdoor life.

30. Scandinavia
Robert S. Townsend, 1447 Irving St., Washington, D. C. History, politics, customs, languages, inhabitants, sports, travel, outdoor life.

31. Germany, Czecho-Slovakia, Austria, Poland
Fred F. Fleischer, care *Adventure*. History, politics, customs, languages, trade opportunities, travel, sports, outdoor life.

32. Great Britain
Thomas Bowen Partington, Constitutional Club, Northumberland Ave., W. C. 2, London, England. General information.

33. South America Part 1 Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile
Edgar Young, care *Adventure*. Geography, inhabitants, history, industries, topography, minerals, game, languages, customs.

34. South America Part 2 Venezuela, the Guianas and Brazil
William R. Barbour, Room 423 Fisk Bldg., Broadway at 57th St., New York. Travel, history, customs, industries, topography, inhabitants, languages, hunting and fishing.

35. South America Part 3 Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay
William R. Barbour, Room 423, Fisk Bldg., Broadway at 57th St., New York. Geography, travel, agriculture, cattle, timber, inhabitants, camping and exploration, general information. Questions regarding employment not answered.

36. Central America
Charles Bell Emerson, Adventure Cabin, Los Gatos, Calif. Canal Zone, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala. Travel, languages, game, conditions, minerals, trading.

37. Mexico Part 1 Northern
J. W. Whiteaker, 1505 W. 10th St., Austin, Tex. Border States of old Mexico—Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. Minerals, lumbering, agriculture, travel, customs, topography, climate, inhabitants, hunting, history, industries.

38. Mexico Part 2 Southern and Lower California
C. R. Mahaffey, care of Roadmaster, S. P. Co., San José, Calif. Lower California; Mexico south of a line from Tampico to Mazatlan. Mining, agriculture, topography, travel, hunting, lumbering, history, inhabitants, business and general conditions.

39. ✠ Canada Part 1 Height of Land, Region of Northern Quebec and Northern Ontario (except Strip between Minn. and C. P. Ry.); Southeastern Ungava and Keewatin
S. E. Sangster ("Canuck"), L. B. 393, Ottawa, Canada. Sport, canoe routes, big game, fish, fur; equipment; Indian life and habits; Hudson's Bay Co. posts; minerals, timber, customs regulations. No questions answered on trapping for profit. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

40. ✠ Canada Part 2 Ottawa Valley and Southeastern Ontario
Harry M. Moore, Deseronto, Ont., Canada. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, mining, lumbering, agriculture, topography, travel, camping, aviation. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

41. ✠ Canada Part 3 Georgian Bay and Southern Ontario
A. D. L. Robinson, 173 Maple Ave., Pembroke, Ont., Canada. Fishing, hunting, trapping, canoeing. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

42. Canada Part 4 Hunters Island and English River District
T. F. Phillips, Department of Science, Duluth Central High School, Duluth, Minn. Fishing, camping, hunting, trapping, canoeing, climate, topography, travel.

43. Canada Part 5 Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta
Ed. L. Carson, Monroe, Wash. Including Peace River district; to Great Slave Lake. Outfits and equipment, guides, big game, minerals, forest, prairie; travel; customs regulations.

44. ✠ Canada Part 6 Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Mackenzie and Northern Keewatin
Reece H. Hague, The Pas, Manitoba, Canada. Homesteading, mining, hunting, trapping, lumbering and travel. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

45. ✠ Canada Part 7 New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Southeastern Quebec
Jas. F. B. Belford, Codrington, Ont., Canada. Hunting, fishing, lumbering, camping, trapping, auto and canoe trips, history, topography, farming, homesteading, mining, paper industry, water-power. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

46. Alaska
Theodore S. Solomons, Larkspur, Calif. Arctic life and travel; boats, packing, back-packing, traction, transport, routes; equipment, clothing, food; physics, hygiene; mountain work.

47. Baffinland and Greenland
Victor Shaw, 2933 W. 25th Ave., Denver, Colo. Hunting, expeditions, dog-team work, whaling, geology, ethnology (Eskimo).

48. Western U. S. Part 1 Calif., Ore., Wash., Nev., Utah and Ariz.
E. E. Harriman, 2303 W. 23rd St., Los Angeles, Calif. Game, fur, fish; camp, cabin; mines, minerals; mountains.

49. Western U. S. Part 2 New Mexico
H. F. Robinson, 200-202 Korber Block, Albuquerque, N. M. Agriculture, automobile routes, Indians, Indian dances, including the snake dance; oil-fields; hunting, fishing, camping; history, early and modern.

50. Western U. S. Part 3 Colo. and Wyo.
Frank Middleton, 509 Frémont St., Laramie, Wyo. Geography, agriculture, stock-raising, mining, hunting, fishing, trapping, camping and outdoor life in general.

51. Western U. S. Part 4 Mont. and the Northern Rocky Mountains
Chester C. Davis, Helena, Mont. Agriculture, mining, northwestern oil-fields, hunting, fishing, camping, automobile tours, guides, early history.

✠ (*Enclose addressed envelop with three cents in stamps—in Mr. Beadle's case twelve cents—NOT attached*)

52. Western U. S. Part 5 Idaho and Surrounding Country

R. T. Newman, care of Anaconda Copper Mining Co., Anaconda, Mont. Camping, shooting, fishing, equipment, information on expeditions, history and inhabitants.

53. Western U. S. Part 6 Tex. and Okla.

J. W. WHITEAKER, 1505 W. 10th St., Austin, Tex. Minerals, agriculture, travel, topography, climate, hunting, history, industries.

54. Middle Western U. S. Part 1 The Dakotas, Neb., Ia., Kan.

JOSEPH MILLS HANSON (lately Capt. A. E. F.), care *Adventure.* Hunting, fishing, travel. Especially, early history of Missouri Valley.

55. Middle Western U. S. Part 2 Mo. and Ark.

JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care of *Adventure.* Also the Missouri Valley up to Sioux City, Iowa. Wilder countries of the Ozarks, and swamps; hunting, fishing, trapping, farming, mining and range lands; big-timber sections.

56. Middle Western U. S. Part 3 Ind., Ill., Mich., Wis., Minn. and Lake Michigan

JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care of *Adventure.* Fishing, clamming, hunting, trapping, lumbering, canoeing, camping, guides, outfits, motoring, agriculture, minerals, natural history, early history, legends.

57. Middle Western U. S. Part 4 Mississippi River

GEO. A. ZERR, Vine and Hill Sts., Crafton P. O., Ingram, Pa. Routes, connections, itineraries; all phases of river steamer and power-boat travel; history and idiosyncrasies of the river and its tributaries. Questions regarding methods of working one's way should be addressed to Mr. Spears. (*See next section.*)

58. Eastern U. S. Part 1 Miss., O., Tenn., Michigan and Hudson Valleys, Great Lakes, Adirondacks

RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Inglewood, Calif. Automobile, motor-cycle, bicycle and pedestrian touring; shanty-boating, river-tripping; outfit suggestions, including those for the transcontinental trails; game, fish and woodcraft; furs, fresh-water pearls, herbs.

59. Eastern U. S. Part 2 Motor-Boat and Canoe Cruising on Delaware and Chesapeake Bays and Tributary Rivers

HOWARD A. SHANNON, care of *Adventure.* Motor-boat equipment and management. Oystering, crabbing, eeling, black bass, pike, sea-trout, croakers; general fishing in tidal waters. Trapping and trucking on Chesapeake Bay. Water fowl and upland game in Maryland and Virginia. Early history of Delaware, Virginia and Maryland.

60. Eastern U. S. Part 3 Marshes and Swamplands of the Atlantic Coast from Philadelphia to Jacksonville

HOWARD A. SHANNON, care of *Adventure.* Okefinokee and Dismal, Okranoke and the Marshes of Glynn; Croatan Indians of the Carolinas. History, traditions, customs, hunting, modes of travel, snakes.

61. Eastern U. S. Part 4 Southern Appalachians

WILLIAM R. BARBOUR, Room 423, Fisk Bldg., Broadway at 57th St., New York. Alleghanies, Blue Ridge, Smokies, Cumberland Plateau, Highland Rim. Topography, climate, timber, hunting and fishing, automobiling, national forests, general information.

62. Eastern U. S. Part 5 Tenn., Ala., Miss., N. and S. C., Fla. and Ga.

HAPSBURG LIEBE, Box 432, Orlando, Fla. Except Tennessee River and Atlantic seaboard. Hunting, fishing, camping; logging, lumbering, sawmilling, saws.

63. Eastern U. S. Part 6 Maine

DR. G. E. HATHORNE, 70 Main Street, Bangor, Me. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, guides, outfits, supplies.

A.—Radio

DONALD MCNICOL, 132 Union Road, Roselle Park, N. J. Telegraphy, telephony, history, broadcasting, apparatus, invention, receiver construction, portable sets.

B.—Mining and Prospecting

VICTOR SHAW, 2933 W. 25th Ave., Denver, Colo. Territory anywhere on the continent of North America. Questions on mines, mining law, mining, mining methods or practise; where and how to prospect, how to outfit; how to make the mine after it is located; how to work it and how to sell it; general geology necessary for miner or prospector, including the precious and base metals and economic minerals such as pitchblende or uranium, gypsum, mica, cryolite, etc. Questions regarding investment or the merits of any particular company are excluded.

C.—Old Songs That Men Have Sung

A department for collecting hitherto unpublished specimens and for answering questions concerning all songs of the out-of-doors that have had sufficient virility to outlast their immediate day; chanteys, "forebitters," ballads—songs of outdoor men—sailors, lumberjacks, soldiers, cowboys, pioneers, rivermen, canal-men, men of the Great Lakes, voyageurs, railroad men, miners, hoboes, plantation hands, etc.—R. W. GORDON, 1262 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif.

D.—Weapons, Past and Present

Rifles, shotguns, pistols, revolvers, ammunition and edged weapons. (Any questions on the arms adapted to a particular locality should *not* be sent to this department but to the "Ask Adventure" editor covering the district.)

1.—**All Shotguns,** including foreign and American makes; wing shooting. JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care of *Adventure.*

2.—**All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers,** including foreign and American makes. DONEGAN WIGGINS, R. F. D. 3, Lock Box 75, Salem, Ore.

3.—**Edged Weapons, and Firearms Prior to 1800.** Swords, pikes, knives, battle-axes, etc., and all firearms of the flintlock, matchlock, wheel-lock and snaphaunce varieties. LEWIS APPLETON BARKER, 40 University Road, Brookline, Mass.

E.—Salt and Fresh Water Fishing

JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care of *Adventure.* Fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting and bait; camping-outfits; fishing-trips.

F.—Tropical Forestry

WILLIAM R. BARBOUR, Room 423, Fisk Bldg., Broadway at 57th St., New York. Tropical forests and forest products; their economic possibilities; distribution, exploration, etc.

G.—Aviation

LIEUT.-COL. W. G. SCHAUFFLER, JR., 2940 Newark St., Cleveland Park, Washington, D. C. Airplanes; airships; aeronautical motors; airways and landing-fields; contests; Aero Clubs; insurance; aeronautical laws; licenses; operating data; schools; foreign activities; publications. No questions answered regarding aeronautical stock-promotion companies.

H.—Army Matters, United States and Foreign

FRED. F. FLEISCHER, care of *Adventure.* *United States:* Military history, military policy. National Defense Act of 1920. Regulations and matters in general for organized reserves. Army and uniform regulations, infantry drill regulations, field service regulations. Tables of organization. Citizens' military training camps. *Foreign:* Strength and distribution of foreign armies before the war. Uniforms. Strength of foreign armies up to date. History of armies of countries covered by Mr. Fleischer in general "Ask Adventure" section. *General:* Tactical questions on the late war. Detailed information on all operations during the late war from the viewpoint of the German high command. Questions regarding enlisted personnel and officers, except such as are published in Officers' Directory, can not be answered.

I.—American Anthropology North of the Panama Canal

ARTHUR WOODWARD, 217 W. 125th St., New York. Customs, dress, architecture, pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions.

J.—STANDING INFORMATION

For **Camp-Fire Stations** write J. Cox, care *Adventure.*

For general information on **U. S.** and its **possessions,** write Supt. of Public Documents, Wash., D. C., for catalog of all Government publications. For **U. S.,** its **possessions and most foreign countries,** the Dept. of Com., Wash., D. C.

For the **Philippines, Porto Rico,** and customs receiverships in **Santo Domingo** and **Haiti,** the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dept., Wash., D. C.

For **Alaska,** the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For **Hawaii,** Hawaii Promotion Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Honolulu, T. H. Also Dept. of the Interior Wash., D. C.

For **Cuba,** Bureau of Information, Dept. of Agri., Com. and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

The Pan-American Union for general information on **Latin-American matters** or for specific data. Address L. S. ROWE, Dir. Gen., Wash., D. C.

For **R. C. M. P.,** Commissioner Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can. Only unmarried British subjects, age 18 to 40, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs.

For **Canal Zone,** the Panama Canal Com., Wash., D. C.

National **Rifle** Association of America, Brig. Gen. Fred H. Phillips, Jr., Sec'y, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Wash., D. C.

United States **Revolver Ass'n.** W. A. MORRALL, Sec'y-Treas., Hotel Virginia, Columbus, O.

National Parks, how to get there and what to do when there. Address National Park Service, Washington, D. C.

Personal

READERS have been asking for the autobiographies of "Ask Adventure" editors; and those staff members who believe that a few words about themselves will promote better acquaintanceship all around, are responding to the request. The order in which these autobiographies are printed doesn't signify anything. They are withdrawn from the file at random:

New York.

Que hubo vales? That's the best open air greeting I know of, and no doubt many of you who have hit the trails through the West and Southwest have heard it more than once. The foreman of this outfit has asked me to come out into the light and speak my little piece to the boys or get "chapped," so here goes.

Nothing very exciting has happened in my young life. I was born in Des Moines, Ia., and lived there until the year of the San Francisco earthquake and fire. That Fall my *padre* decided to go West. Being one of the family, I had to go. We landed in a small one-street town called Ramona, formerly Nuevo, about forty miles from San Diego in the heart of the "back country." The country round round about is chuck full of historical interest dating back to the days of the *adelandados* and more recent days of '49. Being cut off from the outside world except through freight-wagons and stages, I very naturally absorbed considerable affection for the hills and the history of the country in general.

Went to grammar school and high school in that town and of course when the Big Fuss began tried to horn in. Rejected at first because I had two molars missing. Then I got peeved and grabbed an armful of Pullmans to Des Moines in the Winter of '17. Went to art school and worked in the railroad office in that city until Spring of '18. A kind recruiting sergeant told me I was one of the ten million my Tio Sam was looking for. He also told me how nice the regular Army was. How a man went in one day as a private and the next day he was a captain or something; and of course I believed him.

Took my second examination at Omaha and was sworn into the regular Army on the first day of May, 1918, at Ft. Logan, Colo. Two weeks later I was doing squads east and west on the drill-grounds at Ft. Douglas Utah, Salt Lake City. Two months later or thereabouts my outfit, the Twentieth Infantry, rolled into Camp Funston, Kan., just after one of those delightful Kansas thunderstorms, during which more water can fall from the skies than Niagara Falls can dispose of in a year. At any rate we got our "intensive trainng" in Funston for six months.

After the Armistice the Tenth Division was all discharged and sent home except the Twentieth and Forty-first Infantry. The company I was in was loaded into antiquated Pullmans on the fourth of January, 1919, and for the rest of the Winter we kept our weather eye on the locks at Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

I was discharged at the Presidio, June 11, 1919. After that I worked variously as ranch hand, played nurse to a herd or two of bossies on their way across the Imperial Valley desert, listened to the music of a battery of air guns beating against the sides of a steel tanker in the ship-yards at Oakland, rolled the big gas and whistling buoys around the Light-House Depot dock on Goat Island, painted and sand-blasted the same and later entered the University of California at Berkeley. While there I dug into anthropology under Professors Kroeber and Lowie and tried to absorb English under the excellent care of Professor R. P. Utter, who gave me a great deal of encouragement and has proved to be one *buen' amigo*.

Anthropology has always interested me, and now I keep at it in hopes of some day knowing something about it. It is a comparatively recent branch of science; and as it covers about everything under the sun it keeps one digging all the time, so I am asking the gang to kindly remove hobs from foot-gear before starting to work on me. At present I am pounding out copy for one of the large dailies in New York City and find the work extremely interesting.

Guess I have told all that's necessary and maybe a few things that aren't; but that's that, and I'm glad to be with the bunch and will do my best to answer your "whos, hows, whats, whens, whys and wheres." Now I'll say *adios. Hasta luego.*—ARTHUR WOODWARD.

Plattsburg Barracks, N. Y.

They tell me that some of the "Ask Adventure" enthusiasts want to know excuses for existence of the editors for the various countries. So here goes mine.

I'm a New Hampshire Yankee, although I have lived nearly all my life in Massachusetts. At the present time I am twenty-eight years old with great hopes of becoming much older before I close my accounts and balance them for the final audit.

It seems that from the time I was old enough to walk I always wanted to be in the Army; so in 1914 I entered the Military Academy at West Point, where I stayed until the graduation of my class on the 30th of August, 1917. We were not much put out about it when we found out that we were going to graduate ten months early.

My first assignment was with the 6th Infantry at Chickamauga Park, Georgia, where I stayed for five months. Then I got on board of the good old *Leviathan* and took my little trip over the pond and ended up in Winchester, England. My stay in England was cut short, however, by my being sent off down to Athens, Greece, as A. D. C. to General George T. Bartlett. We arrived there in April, 1918, and for only a month's travel I think I put considerable distance between myself and home.

Things were pretty quiet in Athens, and for three months about the only kind of a fight I participated in was a tea fight. Then came the day when I went to Saloniki, and there I stayed for three months and a half and had several interesting trips up on to various sectors of the Macedonian front. Probably you know that on that one front of four hundred fifty miles there were British, French, Italian, Serbian and Greek troops faced by Germans, Austrians and Bulgarians. There's a mixture for you.

My tour of duty in Greece lasted for a bit over two years. This time was mixed up with trips to Constantinople, Smyrna and general trips all over Greece. It was interesting too, all of it.

In May, 1920, the office was moved to Belgrade, which is the capital of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, commonly known as Jugoslavia. There I stayed until the end of August, 1921; but don't think that I sat still in Belgrade. I got to Budapest, Vienna, and in February, 1921, was ordered to Coblenz. Of course I had to go *via* Paris. When I returned from Coblenz I returned over the short route, visiting Berlin and Prague.

In September, 1921, my tour of duty overseas was concluded, and I started for home.

Since I had been overseas I had taken no leave, so I had four perfectly good months all stored up; and I asked for them with permission to travel. The leave was granted, and off I started. I went from Athens, Greece, to Smyrna, Asia Minor, and then jumped to Cairo, where I spent five days climbing pyramids and riding camels.

Then I jumped again, and my next landing was in Bombay, India. I spent two weeks in India and went away up into the northern part and then back down to Calcutta. From there I jumped off to Singapore, which is just seventy miles from the equator.

From there I went on to Hongkong and then to Shanghai, China. Shanghai is just an American city transported to the far East. Then I went on to Peking and after a short stay there went to Japan, where I roamed around for a few days. I left Yokohama on the 11th of November, 1921, and arrived back in the good old U. S. A., *via* Honolulu, on the 27th of December. It certainly was good to be back, too.

From that time my service has been regular peacetime service in the Army, three months in Washington and then three months at Camp Meade. In the Fall of 1922 I decided I wanted to know about the signal work in the Army, so I was sent to the Signal School at Camp Vail, N. J. After the completion of that course I joined the 26th Infantry here at Plattsburg Barracks, and here I am at the present time.

So now you know my excuse for existence. Parts have been fairly exciting, and during other parts I got plenty of sleep. My duty in Greece and Jugoslavia was very interesting and gave me a pretty good insight into the manners and customs of those peoples. Their politics are fascinating. They both have very interesting histories, and I learned a great many things that I had no knowledge of when I went there.

Now if I can answer any questions for you, let's have them. I tap a typewriter fairly well and will always be glad to help on anything. If you try me, I think we can get together.

Here's to you.—W. W. JENNA, 1st Lieut., 26th Inf., U. S. A.

Note from an "A. A." Man

THE inquiry referred to below dealt with the origin of the Indian languages:

Albuquerque, N. M.

The inquiry of Stephen J. Chessman in the January 20 issue, answered by Mr. Shaw, interested me very much, although I know very little on the subject of the Indian languages.

Mr. Chessman makes the mistake made by so many people, that the Indians of North America all speak one and the same language, while in reality many languages are spoken, as widely different, let us say, as are Russian, Spanish and Chinese.

According to those who have made a study of this subject, there are, on the North American continent, and north of Mexico "56 families of speech," this being the authoritative classification of American linguistic stocks. Then these various stocks are again subdivided into what are really different languages and dialects. This may be illustrated by saying in Europe the Spanish, Italian and Portugese are different languages, but they are of the same linguistic stock.

In America, these 56 linguistic stocks have been divided until there is a recognized list of 783 tribes speaking different languages and dialects. Some of these tribes are small, some are now extinct, and some others may be local divisions and not tribes in the proper sense of the term. There are a few tribes that have one of the different linguistic stocks all to themselves, no other tribe using any part or dialect of it, while other stocks have many different dialects.

Of the Athapascan group, there are 53 tribes, each speaking a different dialect, but related in the root stock. These are scattered from northern Alaska to the Mexican border. The Navajos and the various Apache tribes are in this group. Sixty-eight speak variations of the Siouan, the language of the Sioux Indians.

Contrary to generally accepted ideas the vocabularies of practically all of the Indian or American tongues are rich and the grammatical structure is systematic and intricate. It has been estimated that every American language has a couple of thousand stem words and many thousand words that would be recognized as such and placed in dictionaries.

I may illustrate this by a story told me by a missionary to the Navajos. When he first came to these Indians he was told it would be easy to learn to talk with them, as there were "not more than four thousand words in their language." As he learned a word he wrote it on a card for his card index. "And," he said, "I now have forty thousand words in my vocabulary, and I haven't begun to really know the language!"—H. F. ROBINSON.

The full statement of the sections, as given in this issue, is printed only in alternate issues.

Punjab's Tin Armies

AJMERE, where chain armor is still quartermaster stuff:

Question:—"Maybe you can give me a little pointer on the native princes of the Punjab, since you're well acquainted. What sort of troops do the native maharajas maintain, and how are they armed? Do they have the modern weapons—firearms; or do they fight with the old weapons—sabers or *tulwars?*"—EDWARD F. MEDASCH, Cincinnati, O.

Answer, by Mr. MacCreagh:—You must bear in mind first of all that troops in the native States are more a matter of pomp and display than of usefulness. Some of the wealthier rajas actually maintain a so-called army. This army is drilled by English officers—or at least under English supervision—and is usually very well uniformed and equipped with all modern improvements. But would they ever go out and fight? *Mm-mm.* If there should ever be an argument with the next-door neighbor there would immediately be a most courteous note from the British resident "suggesting" what would be the really decent thing to do.

But some of the native rajas keep up a bodyguard of most gorgeous bandits all togged out in gold and hardware. Ajmere, for instance, turns out in chain armor, exactly like the old boys who fought with the crusaders. Bhopal looks like a circus parade with shields and *tulwars.*

Pomp and pageantry. Lots of it is to be found among the independent States. But that is all. It is gorgeous to look at; and it's useful in riots. But that is the limit.

None of this, of course, refers to Nepal, which is an entirely independent kingdom and maintains an army of fifty thousand, well armed and splendidly drilled and kept right up to the minute. Ready to fight, and don't give a hoot whom it fights either.

If you don't want an answer enough to enclose full return postage to carry it, you don't want it.

"Getting By" in South America

HARD work is the best way to make your stake, there as elsewhere. But there are other ways, lays and plays, too:

Question:—"I want to thank you for the dope you gave me on Mex. and S. A. It's a real pleasure to hear from a real dyed-in-the-wool guy for a change, one who has hit the ball with the rest of the boys and put many a can of Java to simmer on a regular jungle fire.

Your information is complete enough in a general way, but in my case doesn't quite fill the bill. The geography of S. A. and Mex. I'm pretty well familiar with, especially the west coast. I made one trip to Valpo on the Grace Line ship *Santa Flavia* and on our homeward bound made most of the usual stops. Now I know well that I can blow down that way and get by pretty good by working my way. Work is one thing that I want to avoid as much as possible; in fact if I want to work and have my nose to the grindstone every day, why go to S. A. to do that?

Now don't get the idea that I never work or that I'm an eighteen-carat bum. In a pinch I can 'cut the buck' with the best of them; in fact I have about a dozen trades to fall back on.

How is the phony-jewelry game, and would a man have a source of supply or would it be necessary to ship everything from the U. S.? For a little change, how is the automobile and tractor game? I'm not exactly a tractor engineer but can hold her down till the engineer comes.

Do the people of S. A. ride many motorcycles, and do they stage many races? As I ride them to death myself perhaps it would be possible to pick up a little change on the race-track. Would it pay to import a racing-machine just for following the races, or aren't there enough races held to make her pay? How would a fair sign-painter who doesn't know the lingo get by just on his sign-work?

What is the general run of pay for a man in the armies? I mean one that can handle heavy artillery as well as machine guns and has Navy as well as Army experience.

What other graft could you suggest to get by on that hasn't too much work connected to it or where one gets good returns for his work? I'm willing to do 'most anything. In fact will do lots of work to avoid work if it pays.

As per your suggestion I slipped the Pan-American U. a few lines but don't expect to get very much information out of them. I know the old stuff—four-ply colored stuff to fool the tourists. They are good at picking the nice scenery but forget the thousands of miles of tough going between the gravy.

Well, I'll appreciate any dope you can slip me. I'm going down that way if she looks favorable or not, so don't be afraid to make it as bad as it really is.

What kind of an outfit should a man on the hoof carry; or does it vary with the climate? I took a foot-power trip from Los to Frisco once and, like the rest of the California down-and-out tourists, had my suit-case on. When I buttoned my coat my trunk was locked. How is it when you go entirely down and out with nothing but natives in the scenery who don't savvy your lingo? Are they good for a touch, or is it tabu to mingle too much with the off-color stuff?

Well, if you happen to get a little time and would unlimber your trusty old Underwood and hammer me out a few wild dashes, I'd appreciate it very much. The fact that you have made that ramble gives your dope just that much more value. If I decide to blow south through New York may come up and give you the good word, perhaps do a little panhandling if circumstances are such. In the mean time the best of wishes."—ART RINDLISBACHER, Rice Lake, Wis.

Answer, by Mr. Young:—Some moniker that, and hard to reel off the finger-ends without pausing! Reminds me that I had so many names in Latin America that I almost forgot my real one. They couldn't say Young and I made it easy for them. The best they could ever do with the word Young was Jooongie, so I kept picking them until I found an easy one.

Speaking of grafts to get by on and make money at. My own experience will help. In one place I put in with a hop-head dentist. He was so full of hop most of the time that he couldn't stand up, so I learned to run his drill and put in fillings. Any good day I made $50, which I split with the man who owned the drill and tools. One day he got homesick and sold me the outfit for the price of a ticket to San Fran. I fixed teeth in several cities.

My next stunt was assisting a real M.D. who incidentally was a morphin head in administering 606 in out-of-the-way places. The Mexican revolution put a kibosh on to our activities. This was in 1908, and it isn't fully settled yet.

I met up with Americans who were running tent saloons near construction camps with gambling as the main money-maker. I later met one of these who was running a club for gambling in Guadalajara and making a fortune.

Photograph galleries in tents, enlarging pictures, selling portraits of the saints, cheap jewelry with some real good stuff for the better class, peddling patent medicine, are good games in any of the Latin countries, and the authorities make no effort to stop you.

"High-Ball" Collins made a pile of money with a merry-go-round. He borrowed a couple of thousand to buy the machine from Herschil, Spillman & Co. and paid it back in six weeks. This was in Panama, and he had to get the police to keep the crowd off.

In southern Brazil I met two men who had upward of sixty thousand they had made from peddling tooth-paste in the diamond region. They peddled tooth-paste and medicine and bought diamonds illicitly from the natives. Later they had them cut and sold them to prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro. One of them told me the average price thay paid was $1.65 per stone and mainly in trade. They had calluses on their hands from packing suit-cases hundreds of miles. A man is bucking the Government when he buys diamonds illicitly.

You asked me of something that corresponds to bootlegging. I'm not advising, just answering. The straight road is the shortest, I have found after making the crooked turns myself. My conscience always was rather easy on the diamonds, though, for I had a water-glass full when I hit Argentina myself.

Valpo is a good racing town. I played them there and made some money at it. We had a friend who rode them, a little white-headed fellow from Chicago. He said when he came out chewing gum he was going to bring him in, and he always did. He got ruled off before we left.

B. A. is also a good racing town. Rio is rather weak, but they have a small session once a year. I met a fellow making money taking up passengers in an aeroplane and another at the old, old game of going up in a balloon and jumping from a parachute.

The old and time-honored game of hard work pays well in S. A. with any of the larger American companies. They usually pay so much and furnish quarters and serve meals at cost. The work isn't hard as a rule, for a white man is usually employed as some sort of a boss. A man can pile up a stake of a few hundred in three or four months, and that is the usual *modus operandi* of the Typical Tropical Tramp. They work a few months and blow along. The jumps are long between jobs, and the trip gives them the necessary reaction for the next spasm of work.

I'm not very strong on killing myself working, but it's not a bad game with such outfits as the Cerro de Pasco Copper Co. or the other large camps. The men who are there are about the finest bunch I have ever met up with. They come from all over and meet a man three-quarters of the way.

Now there isn't much actual info in this, but it is more or less general, for things crop up differently each time a man makes a trip; but the general idea is the same. I'm getting quieted down and would not think of taking the chances with my life that I once took.

Central America used to be good for a man who could smell powder. I hung on to old man Lee Christmas for a time and left him just before he made a million. I thought he was finished, but he still had the come-back in him.

You asked me specifically about the tractor game. This game is fine in Argentina only. Agar Cross & Co. hire tractor men and thresher runners for the high-powered oil-burners used in the harvest. The harvest is short, and if a man can run one of the threshers—made in Duluth, I think—he is good for from between two hundred to four hundred dollars per week, counting his bonus. The season lasts only about six weeks, and there are many who make the trip down just to work through the harvest.

There are steady jobs running tractors and trucks in Argentina also. Buenos Aires is a great big city—something like 2,000,000—and a man can always figure on picking up a job.

"Ask Adventure" service costs you nothing whatever but reply postage and self-addressed envelop.

LOST TRAILS

NOTE—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible*. All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

"COFFEEBEANS" WILLIAM. Resident of either Pennsylvania or Ohio. Any information will be appreciated.—Address E. FREDERICK, 192 Lafayette Ave., Buffalo, N. Y.

MARTIN, HENRY and EMMA. Their daughters Alma and Freda and also their son Henry who were put in the Orphan Asylum at Verbanks, New York, in the year 1909 would like to hear from them.—Address HENRY MARTIN, Alder, Wash.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

Inquiries will be printed three times, then taken out. In the first February issue all unfound names asked for during the past two years will be reprinted alphabetically.

CUDDEBACK, LAVINA G. Born May 25, 1917. Last seen in Hoboken, N. J. May 12, 1920. Her mother's name was Mary V. Cuddeback. Any information will be appreciated by her father.—Address PETER G. CUDDEBACK, care J. P. Grace Estate, Manhasset, L. I.

LOYD. Am sorry for my neglect and am heart broken. Will leave the city with you if you wish. Write me care of *Adventure*.—K.

ALBERT, HELEN C. Last heard from six years ago when she was employed as a nurse in the Norristown, Pa., Insane Asylum. Please write to me.—Address MRS. M. P. NORTH, care of *Adventure*.

MEYERS, S. J. If living, Bugler, Battery C, 18th Field Artillery, A. E. F. If dead, relatives write, information of interest.—Address J. E. CLARK, 109 E. Court St., Flint, Mich.

APPLEGATE, WILLIAM F. Last address Elks Club, Modesto, Calif. Inheritance money awaiting him.—Address M. APPLEGATE, Free Hold, N. J.

SORREL, ROBERT. Write to your old buddy. Received letter from Detroit, but no address.—Address JNO. HARTNELL, Marine Flying Field, Flight F, Quantico, Va.

A COMPLETE list of unclaimed mail will be published in December 30th and June 30th issues of Adventure.

WANTED to hear from any one who went to France in Third Detachment of labor foremen.—Address JAMES NICHOLS, 1305 S. Division Ave., Grand Rapids, Mich.

THE following have been inquired for in either the March 20, or April 10, 1924 issues of Adventure. They can get the name and address of the inquirer from this magazine.

BUCKLEY, JIM; Caples, Albert; Carrere, Joseph Maxwell, Jr.; Cate, William C.; Cooper, Andrew D.; De Foe, Clarence; Douglas, Wallace; Edwards, Thomas; Fulton, Frank; Hansen, Anders; Howe, Charles; Kane, Thomas Edward; Long, Leonard C.; Love, Harry; McDonald, Mrs. Anna; McRae, Normal N.; Morgan, John; Murray, Richard H.; Olson, Lawrence T.; Renz, Carrie; Rogers, Ellis; Sharpe, Lester E.; Thompson, Chester; Thorp, William; Tomlin, Bradley; Trainor, Owen P.; Uhl, James (Red); White, Chester Allen.

MISCELLANEOUS—Burke; Charles; C. B.; Ek.; F. P. H.; Honey; Tom Celeste needs operation; W. N. S.

MCNALLY, A. B. Marine, Was stationed in San Diego, Calif. Write.—Address F. E. DRAKE, Box 277, E. San Diego, Calif.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

MAY 10TH ISSUE

Besides the **complete novel** and **complete novelette** mentioned on the second contents page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories:

WHOSE COMMAND? ***Charles Victor Fischer***
The captain wouldn't take a chance.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CAPTAIN OF THE GUARDS
An Incident in the Affairs of Mohamed Ali ***George E. Holt***
He runs afoul of the Basha of Fez.

ANTONIO ***F. St. Mars***
What happened to the rat after he left the ship.

THE PAPA MAN ***Nevil G. Henshaw***
A bully is challenged to a strange duel.

RIFLE RULE A Five-Part Story Part III ***Hugh Pendexter***
The curse of death is put on *Watt* and *Fair*.

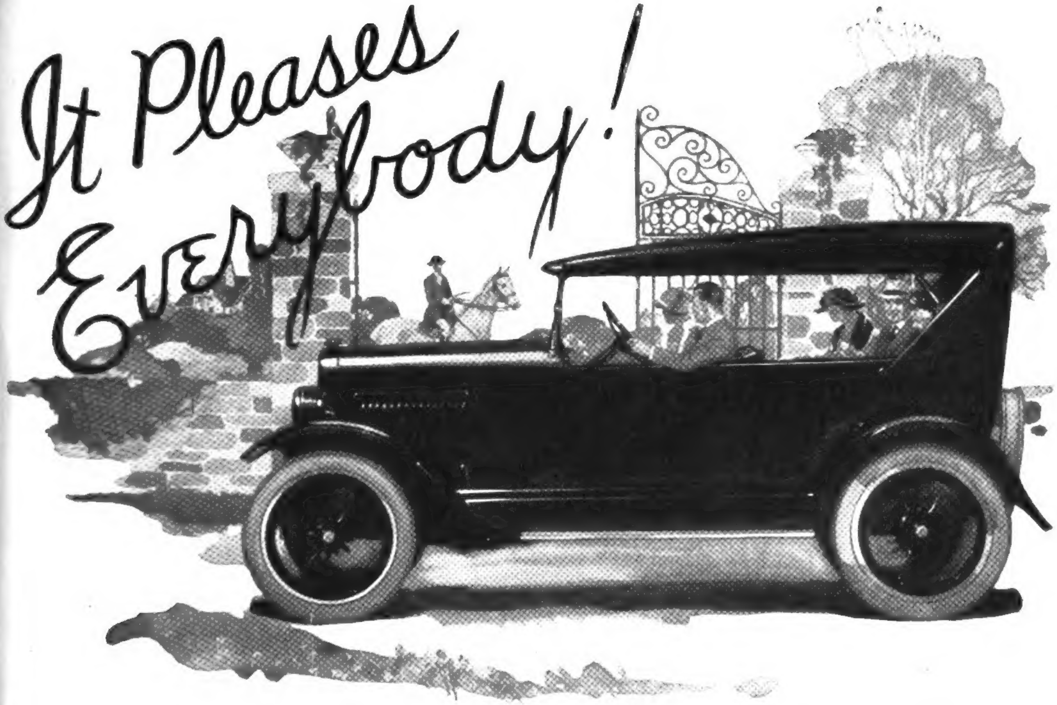
THE HARD GUYS ***Edward Speyer***
A quiet evening with the bootleggers.

HERITAGE ***Norman Reilly Raine***
A limey stowaway and some lascar stokers.

THE SILENT CALL ***H. Mortimer Batten***
Dog loyalty in the Canadian North.

Still Farther Ahead

IN THE three issues following the next there will be *long stories* by Gordon Young, J. D. Newsom, T. S. Stribling, Barry Scobee, Frederick Moore, Georges Surdez, H. C. Bailey, Gordon MacCreagh, Arthur D. Howden Smith and H. C. Wire; and short stories by Captain Dingle, F. St. Mars, Herman Petersen, Bill Adams, Thomas Topham, Wilbur Watkins, John Webb, Konroy Kroder, Alanson Skinner and Dale Collins—stories of the South Seas, the Navy, the War, the West, Philippines, South America, Medieval France, the Old Frontier, soldiers, sailors, cowboys, aviators, knights-at-arms, adventurers throughout the world.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